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LITTLE MOCCASIN;

OR,

ALONG THE MADAWASKA.

A STORY OF LIFE AND LOVE IN THE LUMBER REGION.

BY JOHN NEAL.

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LITTLE MOCCASIN.

CHAPTER I.

DOWN EAST—THE LUMBERING CAMP.

THE down-easters are to other Yankees what other Yankees are to the rest of the world. Without being dealers in wooden nutmegs, horn gun-flints, or cuckoo-clocks, they are sharp at a bargain, and not easily overreached or outwitted. They are not only hardy, adventurous, and full of resource, but patient, especially on great occasions, and generally trustworthy; and, whether dealing in horseflesh, timber lands or stumpage, are reasonably honest, until they find you claiming to be more than a match for the rest of mankind.

For example. By the treaty of 1842 with Great Britain, it was agreed that all the timber run down the St. John, which rises in Maine, should be dealt with as if it were British timber; whereby it was understood by the down-easters, and at the time by the provincials, that where it passed through New Brunswick, it was to be free from taxation. But no sooner was the treaty ratified, than our British neighbors levied a duty on all the timber passing down the St. John, British as well as American; and then, to satisfy their own people, made a corresponding allowance on the stumpage to all who cut their timber on the crown lands!

This was a little too much. The challenge was accepted; and the down-easters went to work and opened a canal about a mile in length, and four rods in width—now greatly enlarged—through a succession of gullies between Telos Lake, the head of the St. John on this side, and Webster Pond, the head of the east branch of the Penobscot, so that the lake, being much higher, was emptied into the pond. And when

the provincials turned over in their sleep, and began to rub their eyes and look about them, they found the St. John running the wrong way; and so, by their sharp practice, they lost not only the duties on Yankee timber, but a large supply of water.

So much for being born with your eye-teeth cut. The Webster stream, taking the logs from the upper Alegash and all its tributaries, a chain of large stagnant lakes, and tearing its way through these rocky ravines, and foaming and flashing with a noise like subterranean thunder after a spring freshet, has a terrible reputation among lumbermen of experience. Even the largest logs, overthrown giants of the aboriginal growth, are often shattered and torn to pieces, or literally "chawed up," on their way down to the mills. And yet, our native Indians are not afraid to launch their canoes upon it, like so many egg-shells—hit or miss—when it is all covered with yellow foam; and Thoreau says, it is like navigating a thunder-spout.*

Near this canal—the Webster stream, as it is now called—in the severe winter of 1863-4, a gang of lumbermen were gathered about a great roaring fire in a logger-camp; their wet clothes, whether on or off, steaming and smoking so as to fill the air with moisture like a summer fog. Hour after hour, they had been listening to fierce, wild stories of Indian warfare, wolf-hunting and moose-hunting, and witches and goblins and haunted houses and grave-yards, and "*sperrits*," till their

* Fifty to one, the canal at Vicksburg, as well as that of Outlet Gap, was not only a Yankee suggestion, but a down-eastern "*idée*." One of these lumbermen, a Captain Walker of the Sixth Maine, undertook to throw a bridge over the Hazel river, 240 feet in width, strong enough to bear a train of thirty heavily laden army wagons, without yielding or swinging—the pontoon bridge having been swept away. With no other tools than one chisel, one auger, a few axes and spades, and a coil of ropes, he built a bridge 250 feet long and twenty-five in height, in three days. And, soon after, as if to show that Aladdin's Lamp was no fable, he threw another bridge, 200 feet long and twenty-five in height, about three miles higher up, in forty-eight hours: and finally, when the advance of the Sixth corps reached the Ny river and found it too deep for fording, and General Wright said to him, while ordering a halt for dinner, "We must have one of your bridges over there, and I will give you one hour," Walker gathered his men, and in twenty-seven minutes threw a bridge across, seventy-three feet long, over which the trains and heavy artillery passed without accident or delay! Of their astonishing readiness in leveling forests and opening high ways, about as fast as large armies can march, everybody has heard so much, that we need not particularize. Enough to say, that within their acknowledged field of action, the down-easters, and especially the lumbermen and river-drivers and loggers of the Pine State, are a race by themselves.

voices died away, one after another, in low whispers, with long pauses of deathlike stillness, and their circle had gradually contracted to half the original size when they first gathered about the fire and hung up their clothes to dry, after such a meal as only the lumbermen of the Pine-tree State are equal to, after a long tramp through the snow. Most of these rough men were sitting now, each with a hand upon his neighbor's knee, or with one arm about his neck, in that kind of generous, warm-hearted fellowship which grows out of hardship, trial and adventure.

Even the boldest—and there were bold men among that crew, men who had risked their lives in hunting and river-driving, day after day, and year after year, without once thinking of death—even the boldest felt a thrill now and then, as the stories went on, and they looked up through a large opening in the roof, which was intended to carry off the smoke, and up—up—into the vast overhanging midnight sky, crowded with stars of uncommon size, and listened to the strange, heavy, whispering stillness that came and went, and seemed to fill earth and sky, after the long, dreary snow-storm which had continued night and day for nearly a week—putting a stop to all their lumbering operations, blocking up all the highways and cattle-paths, and overloading the huge hemlocks and stately pines, till their branches were bent down and arched over, so that, look where you would, nothing but long avenues and booths and bowers, blossoming all over like the hawthorn hedges of our mother country, were to be seen—but motionless and silent as a grave-yard.

Though built of large, rough logs, covered in with hemlock and spruce branches, and thoroughly strengthened in every way, such was the prodigious weight of snow upon the roof under which they were now sitting, that not a few troubled looks were turned up to it, from time to time, as they sat there, crowded together, listening to these wild stories, and catching their breath at long intervals. And though their sweet-smelling cedar-beds were piled three feet high, and richer, by far, to the stalwart logger than the three-piled velvet of Genoa to the unwearied and listless, they were almost afraid to turn in for the night, and yet were unwilling to acknowledge the fear they felt, even to themselves.

"Oh, botheration, Dave Perry! what on airth are you lookin' at now—you and Charley Frost? Ain't afeard the ruff 'll be blown down upon us, hey? Look at him! jes' look at him, Cap'n Bob—'nough to set a feller's teeth chatterin'. I say, though, Dave, better cheer up, an' let the mulligrubs go! Storm's over now; wind's all died away; and my notion is—between you an' me an' the post—if you don't wake up and stir your stumps, you wun't continer leng. Them's my sentiments."

The captain shook his head at the speaker, a strange, wayward-looking fellow, with red, bushy hair, a hanging lip, and a most enormous mouth, always open, by the name of Hannaford, and then made a sign for the others to take no notice of Perry, who sat a little behind the rest, with his head thrown back, now with both hands clasped over his lifted knee, and looking as if he saw something through the roof with his large, dark, dreamy eyes, and now playing nervously with the moss which was crowded into all the spaces between the logs, to "chink" them against the weather.

"The blackest sky—the deadliest—I ever saw in all my life," said Perry, at last, in a low, trembling, mournful voice. "A black-velvet sky, such as they cover hearses with—and set thick with stars;" and then he tried to smile, as he met the eye of Hannaford, who sat watching him with a look of deep interest; but the smile was a failure, a decided failure—sad, sorrowful and ghastly.

"Captain Gage," he added, after another long pause—"captain, do you believe in ghosts?"

"Can not say I do," said the captain, "though I—"

Before he could finish what he had to say, somebody called out from the furthest corner and asked what day of the month it was; and another declared he had "lost his reckoning somehow, pretty much as Robinson Crusoe had lost his'n," and wished he had thought of "notchin' a stick when the storm fust set in."

"To-day," said the captain, stooping over a heap of red coals, and opening a sort of diary—"to-day is the—let me see—yes, the twenty-eighth—no, the twenty-ninth of December."

"The twenty-ninth of December! Almighty God! Are

you quite sure, Captain Gage?" exclaimed one of the party, who had not opened his mouth for the last hour; a very tall, sinewy, strange-looking man, with short, coal-black hair, large, glittering teeth, and a swarthy complexion, with the garb and air of a half-breed on the war-path.

"Most assuredly," said Gage; "look for yourself, major. Yesterday was the twenty-eighth, you see, and if you—"

But instead of answering, or moving to see the entry to which his attention had been called, his eyes were riveted on Perry, who sat crouching on a heap of cedar branches, with glowing eyes and clenched hands, and leaning forward, as if just ready to spring at his throat.

"Thunder and lightning!" yelled Hannaford. "What's to pay now!"

"Be quiet, Hannaford—leave the matter with me," said Gage, stepping between the two. "Upon my soul, Perry, you make my very blood run cold—what is the meaning of this?"

"Ask him," said the major. "I have nothing to say; but if the man wants a quarrel, he can have it," and he turned away, and took his seat by the fire, without another word.

Here came in a loud, triumphant crow—so natural and so clear, that Gage looked up to the roof in astonishment—and then a low caterwauling.

"Confound your nonsense, Charley Frost!" said somebody in the far shadow. "Why can't you behave yourself?"

"Yes, darling, only be a little more respectful if you please—too much freedom breeds despise."

"Oh, you be hanged!" said another voice, trying to smother a laugh.

"Certainly, precious—any thing to oblige you; but I say, governor, what are you goin' to do with the major and the deacon?—I shall be afraid to sleep in the same township with 'em, if you don't interfere, and make 'em promise not to eat each other up, afore mornin'."

"Hush your gab! shet up—had enough o' your nonsense, Charley! Shet clam!" cried half a dozen of the crew, all speaking together.

"Shet clam 'tis then!" said Charley. "Stand by to let go, lollipop!"

"Be quiet, sir," said Gage.

"Yes, dear—sartin."

"I should like to understand what the Old Harry possesses you," continued Gage, turning toward Perry. "There you sit, with your jaws half open, staring into the eyes of Major Dyer, and he into yours, both paler than I ever saw you before, though I have seen you both balancing for your lives on the very pitch of the falls."

"Falls!—what falls?" muttered Perry.

"All the way down from the Webster stream to Bangor," said Gage.

"Oh, ah—I understand you, now!" said Perry; and the major, who had turned with a look of surprise toward Gage, nodded assent, and fell back into a reverie, occasionally dropping a word or two, in the course of the conversation, like a man talking to himself.

"And all the time," continued Gage, with a pleasant voice, though evidently prepared for another outburst, "all the time looking as if there were some dreadful mystery in the twenty-ninth of December."

"And so there is, Cap'n Gage," squeaked a small voice in the distance; "and if you'll stand treat, I'll tell you what 'tis."

"With all my heart, Charley—what is it?"

"Well, governor, since you're so much in airnest, here goes. The 29th of December is only two days before a happy New Year."

"Oh, you get aout! haw, haw, haw! that's jist like you, Charley Frost—hurray!" shouted one and another of the gang, while Gage turned away with a look of displeasure.

Again Perry tried to smile; but again it was a failure, and at last, he pulled his wolf-skin cap over his eyes, and flung himself back once more upon the cedar and spruce branches, and turned his face to the wall.

Meanwhile the brow of Major Dyer seemed to gather blackness, as he sat there looking into the bed of live coals with his elbows resting on his knees, and his palms outspread over them.

After a long silence, the major seemed to have reached a conclusion. Drawing the end of the bench a little nearer to Perry, so that he might hold a conversation with him, if it

should become necessary, without being overheard by the rest, he said:

"I pray you, David Perry—I adjure you, by the living God, to be frank with me. I have no unhallowed curiosity to indulge, no evil purpose in my heart, no vengeance to gratify."

Perry lifted his head, and fastened his eyes upon the speaker with an expression so deadly and so intense, that Gage was moved to hitch a little nearer, and seemed half inclined to interfere.

The major continued, laying his hand upon Gage's knee, as he spoke. "Vengeance is mine—I will repay, saith the Lord."

"Well," said Perry, "why don't you go on? What are you stopping for?"

"I will go on—and I ask you, as I would if I were on my death-bed, or you on yours, why that mentioning of the 29th of December should make you start up as you did, and threaten me as you did with your eyes—looking as if you saw a spirit? and why, after meeting me face to face, like a brave, honest man, as I believe you are, why did you turn your face to the wall and refuse to answer my questioning? And why that heaving of your chest, as if it were still unsafe to be near you?"

"All right, and proper enough, I dare say," said Perry, after a short struggle with himself—a sort of paroxysm—as if he were wrestling down some unacknowledged though terrible purpose; "but before I answer the question you have put me, as if I were on trial for my life—what if I should ask you why *you* started up, and flung away your blanket, so as to leave your right arm free, and stood overtopping the whole of us, head and shoulders, like Saul among the princes of Israel, and exclaimed Almighty God! when Mr. Gage—"

"Cap'n Gage, if you please; we don't allow no misterin' here," squeaked Charley, and then there was another outburst of ringing laughter.

"Be quiet, Charley!"

"Yes, dear."

"When Mr. Gage—or Captain Gage if you say so," continued Perry, in the same low, quiet, solemn voice, "mentioned the day of the month."

"You are right, neighbor Perry—you are right! and there's my hand on it," said the major, instantly changing the

expression of his countenance and withdrawing his hand from Gage's knee and offering it to Perry. "Most assuredly you have as much right to ask an explanation of me as I of you, and I ought to have had my senses about me; but, to say the simple truth, I was so utterly astonished, that any other living man should have a reason for remembering that particular day—"

"I understand you perfectly now," said Perry, glancing round upon the eager faces about him, and then nodding to the major.

"You are right," said the major, returning the nod. "We will talk this matter over by ourselves."

"With all my heart," was the reply. "You can not be more in earnest than I am."

"Ah! What was that!" suddenly exclaimed a short, rough-looking man with prodigious breadth of shoulders, hands like the paws of a grizzly bear, and shaggy locks, wearing a red shirt, Indian leggings and a white fox-cap, tilted over one ear; clutching Perry by the arm, as he spoke, who sat leaning back, with his head resting against the wall of logs, and breathing as if almost asleep, or wishing to appear so.

Perry sprung to his feet, as if a panther had fallen through the roof, and struck him in passing, and stood clutching the hilt of a large, silver-mounted hunting-knife, with eyes of alarming brightness, and breathing like a hunted bear.

A loud, clamorous, rattling laugh followed, like a near volley of musketry, and the half-drawn hunting-knife was returned to the sheath.

"Look o' there, boys! I say, deacon, jist look o' there!" screamed Charley. "What did I tell ye?" pointing to a rope of moss that hung about Perry's legs. "I knowed he'd have all the chinkin' cut afore he knowed where he was, when I saw his hand pushed in between the logs, and twitchin' at the moss—and now he's left a hole big enough to drive a cart and oxen through."

"Confound the fellow!" said Gage, "what on earth shall we do with him, if he keeps meddling in this way—he'll have us all together by the ears."

"Muzzie him—cob him!" was the cry, and for a minute or so, poor Charley looked as if he thought his time had come.

"Yes, governor, certainly—nothing would be pleasanter on such a night as this," he whimpered.

"Have done with your nonsense, Charley Frost, once for all!" said the captain, with a serious, almost threatening look, for he saw that Perry was in no mood for trifling, and the major seemed greatly disturbed. "It is near midnight, boys, and we ought to be all abed and asleep; for to-morrow we shall have our hands full, and if we don't get the roads broke before it comes a thaw, our winter's work will foot up small, you may depend."

"Come out at the leetle eend o' the horn, hey, cap'n?" growled Hannaford.

Without answering this inquiry, Gage got up and went to the door and pushed it open, and stood still and listened. The blackness overhead was awful, the stillness at first oppressive, the huge straight pines, many of them running up nearly two hundred feet, and barkless and branchless half the way, as if thunder-blasted from their birth, were like pillars towering into the sky and propping the firmament. After listening awhile, his countenance changed suddenly, and he made a sign to the major and Perry, and after they had joined him, just outside the door, he asked them, in a low voice, if they heard any thing.

Both stood still for a few moments, with their hands behind their ears, and at last the major spoke—the Old Forester, as he was sometimes called, though far from being an old man—and said, in a voice which did not reach the boys inside, though they were all listening till they had grown restless and fidgety, "Yes, I hear the rush and roar of waters as I never heard them but once before in all my life."

Perry turned suddenly upon him, but said nothing, as he continued:

"And they have been roaring in my ears ever since."

"Ah-ha!" said Perry. And again these two men stood eyeing each other in a way that seemed to trouble the captain more than he chose to acknowledge, even to himself.

Meanwhile there was a low, half-smothered conversation going on within, which threatened to break out into something like a dispute.

"I tell ye, I know!" said Charley. "Goodness me!"

"You know! wal, what d'ye know?"

"I know what they mean by all that whispering and bother out there."

"What bother, Charley?"

"About the 29th of December."

"That's your sort, Charley! Out with it!"

Charley shook his head, turned up the whites of his eyes to the roof, shifted his legs, rubbed his shins, and waited for a little more urging.

At last he said: "Though you may think poor Charley a little slack-baked, there ain't one o' you, I'll bate, has ever caught the idee."

"Wal, wal, never mind; out with it, my boy."

"Sartin, precious—"

"But speak low, for the old man is watchin' us."

"Well, then, the 29th of December is a—now guess, will ye?"

"No, no; have done with your foolin', if you don't want to be chucked through that window"—pointing—"into a snow-bank, head first."

"Head first, lollipop?"

"Yes, Charley, head first, an' no mistake."

"Then here goes. The 29th of December must be—it can't be otherwise"—all the company leaned forward eagerly, and even the outsiders appeared to wait for the sentence to be finished—"it must be *somebody's* birthday. Mutton-heads!"

One moment of dead silence, and then followed such an uproar!—and poor Charley was caught up by the legs and arms, and hustled and tumbled about from pillar to post, till the captain was obliged to interfere.

"Order! order! silence within there!" cried he. "Not another word, for your lives! There's mischief brewing, and we want to know what it means."

Again all three stood listening outside the lodge, but somewhat further off than before, as if they did not mean to be overheard.

After another long long lull of perfect stillness, there came slowly and from afar a great, heavy, tumultuous roar, reminding the forester, he said, of what he had often heard in the Bay of Fundy, where the tide rises forty feet or so, in three

waves at the most—and growing louder and louder and nearer and nearer at long intervals.

“What is it, major?” said Gage, appealing to the man whose reputation for woodcraft and for a knowledge of the whole country, on both sides of the line, seemed coëxtensive, if not coëval with the pine woods themselves.

“It is the Webster stream, cutting a new passage for itself somewhere,” said he, with a troubled and somewhat anxious manner which appeared to solemnize both Gage and Perry.

“The Webster stream! and so far off! It sounds to me more like a winter hurricane, and, if it were warm weather, I should say it would soon be down upon us. Halloo! bear a hand there, boys! look to your props and stays, and get a log or two more on the roof!” shouted Gage.

As he spoke, the heavy slab door banged to with a loud report, followed with a reverberation through the woods like distant thunder, and down came the snow by cartloads from all the uppermost branches of all the giant trees overhanging their little neighborhood.

“There, my good sir! there you have it!” said Gage. “The old north wind is out on the rampage, and we must be prepared for it.”

“Nevertheless, Captain Gage, the noise we hear is not the wind, but the Webster stream, with its tail up, tearing a new passage for itself somewhere, and thundering through the wilderness like a whirlwind.”

“You don’t say so! leaving our whole winter’s work high and dry, perhaps, and the logs we have hauled out of reach just where we have left them to rot and crumble?”

“Never fear. The spring freshets will find them out and send them pitching and tumbling on their way, wherever they may be lodged now. And this new outbreak of old Webster’s may give you another outlet and save teaming.”

“Still, I don’t quite understand. Why do we hear the noise now, and why have we never heard it before?”

“We hear it now because the wind is blowing this way, and because of the remarkable deathlike stillness of the night. You are strangely mistaken, however. The noise we now hear you have heard every day of your life while camping out or lumbering in this neighborhood, though never so near nor so

loud. At any rate, I have, and so have you, neighbor Perry, ever since the canal was cut, hey?"

Perry nodded, and seemed lost in thought.

"Well," continued Gage, "you may be right, after all, and I dare say you are, with your large experience along here; and I myself have heard people say, who have lived all their lives within a few miles of Niagara——"

Both Perry and the major started, interchanged a look, and then waited for the captain to finish.

"I have been told they never hear the roar of the Falls unless their attention is called to it."

"Just as we soon fail to hear the striking of the hours after a clock has been hung up against a reverberating wainscot, although for a time it may have kept us awake, till we could hear nothing else," added the major.

"Or a rumbling of carts over a paved street. When we first go from the country into a large town, we can hardly hear ourselves speak; but after a few days we do not mind the noise any more than we should the rustling of a cornfield when the wind freshens," continued Gage.

"But surely the sound seems to be coming nearer," said Perry.

"All a mistake, sir. It is only a change of the wind after a lull. I know where the bend is, and it can not possibly come nearer without cleaving its way through a rocky ledge half a mile in width."

"I believe he is right, Captain Gage," said Perry. "I remember the sound—I remember it from the first; for I was one of the gang who volunteered to open a sluice-way through the ravine where it has been tumbling and roaring these twenty years, and carrying with it all the logs, which otherwise would have gone through British territory and paid a heavy tax."

"Ah—indeed!—I congratulate you with all my heart!" said the major, thrashing his arms, and blowing his fingers, and stamping with all his might and main; "but hadn't we better go inside, where we can talk these matters over without freezing stiff?"

"Well done the major! hurrah for you!" shouted a voice from the window, and instantly a head, which had been

thrust out suddenly, disappeared, as if the proprietor had been pulled in by the legs.

"So much for listening!" said somebody within.

"Yes, deacon," said Charley; "ever saw wood with a hammer, hey?—ever pick your teeth with a flat-iron?—where's your gumption, dearest?—no more sprawl in you than—high!—keep your fist to yourself, man, if you don't want to be pitched through that winder."

Another obstreperous haw, haw!

"Jiss to think o' the major complainin' o' the cold!—a feller that wouldn't mind bein' packed in ice for a whole winter—halloo!—here they come!"

And they all withdrew from the fire, and left an empty bench for them, with a large heap of roasted potatoes, just taken out of the burning ashes, and a plenty of salt fish in strips, and a firkin of butter within reach.

"By my faith!" exclaimed Gage, "but this is more than we bargained for. Thank you, boys—but help yourselves; and now," throwing his legs over a sort of clothes-horse, upon which two or three shaggy great-coats, and a buffalo-robe, and lots of leggings and yarn stockings were steaming, till the atmosphere was like that of a great wash-room at midsummer; "and now," casting his eyes over the walls of the camp, and over the hunting and fishing gear, and guns and shot-pouches, and showy blankets, and moose-antlers, and wolf-skins that were hung upon the logs, and then over the upturned countenances of the men, as if taking an inventory of their possessions, "and *now*—what say you for one more story, boys, before we turn in for the night?"

"By all means! Hurrah for Cap'n Bob! That's your sort!" answered several voices.

"Well—whose turn is it?"

"The major's! Hurrah for the major!"

But the major shook his head. "No, no," said he; "my day for story-telling has gone by; life has got to be too serious a matter at my age—"

"At your age!—the spryest man among us, by all odds!" said Hannaford.

"That I have had some strange adventures, and some terrible escapes, I am willing to acknowledge; but after the

ghost-stories you have been listening to, I am afraid that any thing like the simple truth wouldn't relish."

"That's all a mistake!" said Seth Hannaford. "That's jest what we want—the truth, and nothin' but the truth; we are tired of these cock-and-bull stories about graveyards, and haunted houses, and sich like."

"If you *would* be so kind, major," said Gage, laying his hand upon the major's knee. "The boys have got a notion that you know every thing—that you have been everywhere—and that, in a word," laughing, "you are an exceedingly mysterious personage, and especially since the few words that passed between you and our friend Perry here, about the 29th of December. They are tired of the tough stories they hear every day; and I do hope you will consent."

The major bowed his face upon his hands, and sat awhile without speaking, and then, as if he had been wrestling with himself, he lifted his countenance, pale and swarthy, and so changed by that fierce inward struggle, that they who saw the change withdrew their gaze and seemed afraid to speak.

CHAPTER II.

A FIERY APPARITION.

At last, he uncovered his face and took a survey of the whole company, one by one, as they lay about in all sorts of strange though picturesque attitudes—two or three lying flat on their backs, with their hands under their heads, and knees lifted up, and others leaning on one or both elbows, but all with eyes fastened upon the speaker.

"The story I have made up my mind to tell you," said he, with a sort of preliminary shudder, "though it may seem strange and perhaps extravagant, I know to be true—substantially true, I mean; many of the incidents happened under my own observation, and others I have from eyewitnesses; but you must bear with me, and allow me to abridge it as

much as I can ; for long stories at this time of night are hardly the thing, hey, Captain Gage ?”

“Long or short, sir ; suit yourself and we shall be satisfied.”

“Well—many years ago there was a young man living on the borders of New Hampshire, who had a great reputation through all that part of the country, for wrestling and running and leaping. Before he was eighteen, he had carried off two or three prizes at Montreal and Quebec against the picked men of the garrison ; and once, on being pitted against a Devonshire boy, he received a kick on the shins from the horn-lipped, thick-soled shoes they wrestle with, which took away his breath, and he was barely able to say, “Don’t do that again ;” and when the fellow tried it a second time, he let fly and broke his leg, notwithstanding it was padded an inch thick—all which gave him such a reputation for strength and quickness, that few were willing to encounter him.”

“That’s your sort !” said Charley, and the others began to rouse up and shake their heads and rub their hands. “But what was his name, though ?”

“Well, my friends, we may as well call him—let me see—Peter ; yes, Peter will answer our purpose for the present.”

“His other name, if you please, major,” whispered Gage.

“His other name ?—oh, certainly ; let us call him Smith Peter Smith.”

“Go on, if you please—”

“And no more interruptions,” muttered Charley

“Hold your yop, Charley Frost !” yelled Hannaford clapping his huge hand over the fellow’s mouth ; shet clam !”

“Cock-a-doodle-doo !” screamed Charley, through the sprawling fingers of Hannaford. “Who cares for you ?”

“Boys, boys !—no interruption, if you please. Go ahead major.”

“Well, Smith was never known to seek a quarrel, nor would he go much out of his way to avoid one. At all the raisings, and general musters, and wrestling-matches, and turkey-shootings for a hundred miles around, he was sure to be heard of. He had come, too, of the best old revolutionary stock. His grandfather was out in the Old French War, with Amherst and Wolfe. His father fell under Stark, at the battle

of Bennington, where the firing was like a continual clap of thunder; and Stark said, 'We must carry that work, boys, or Molly Stark sleeps a widow to-night.' And his father was taken off the field at Lundy's Lane, with half a dozen bullet-holes through his body, and a bayonet wound in his hip, and was only saved at last by a friendly Ojibbeway, who reported his behavior to General Scott.

"Before Peter was fifteen, he had begun to wish for something to do in the same way. He longed for another war—an outbreak along the border, where he might have a pop at the Britishers, if nothing more; and, at last, on his eighteenth birthday, he suddenly disappeared, and nothing was heard of him for a twelvemonth or so, when he stood once more face to face with his old father, upon the stone doorstep, in the dress of an Indian chief, carrying a splendid silver-mounted rifle, slung at his back, and a richly-ornamented hunting-knife, bullet-pouch, pipe and tomahawk in his belt.

"His father looked at him in silence; measured his whole length and breadth in feet and inches; took a survey of his wardrobe and weapons; felt of the furs, and being a man of few words, merely said: 'Beaver Pete?'

"'Musquash dad.' And there the conversation ended.

"Two days after this he disappeared again; and the next they heard of him was, that he had been met with at Niagara Falls one day, standing near a group of young British officers, who were chaffering with a young Indian girl, Oonance, they called her; that one of them, after paying her liberally for a pair of embroidered moccasins, had the impudence to stoop down and try to look into her eyes. Peter caught him by the collar. The officer flung away, and said, perhaps in allusion to his country garb and slouching air:

"You are no gentleman, sir!

"'And are *you* a gentleman, sir?' said Pete

"'Am I a gentleman! To be sure I am!

"'Then, sir, allow me to thank you for the compliment,' said the country boy. Whereupon there was a great laugh among the bystanders, which so exasperated the officer, that he let fly at Smith, who caught the blow on his arm, and then with a trip and a push, sent him headlong over the bank into a sand-pit."

“Hurrah for Pete Smith! Hurrah for our side! Whoop!” shouted the boys; and then there was another loud crow from Charley.

“Hush! hush!” whispered Gage. “Go on with your story, major.”

“This little affair ended, Peter started off on what they call the Indian loup—a long, swinging trot—on his way to the battle-ground where his father fell. He found the spot—saw the tree-branches, thicker than his thigh, which had been cut off by the cannon-balls; and stood where Miller, the glorious fellow, on being asked ‘if he could carry that battery,’ answered, ‘I’ll try, sir,’ and carried it.

“The story goes that, on returning to the Falls toward evening, he found the Indians packing up their wares, and groups of young officers, and fashionably-dressed women watching the process. Wanting to buy a keepsake for his old father, he went up to a young Indian girl, who sat by herself, without lifting her eyes, even to make change, or opening her mouth, except to name the price of an article; though she must have heard the whispering all about her, and the compliments to her wondrous beauty, and sweet, musical voice. After listening a few moments, he found it was Oonanee herself, or Rippling Sunshine, for so the officers called her, two of whom were making purchases on a magnificent scale, ‘without regard to expense.’ And one of these he soon recognized for the coxcomb he had pitched over the bank. There were watch-guards and watch-cases, and pen-wipers and moccasins, embroidered with porcupine-quills, and what seemed to be seed pearls. A little way off sat her mother, as ugly an old witch as ever breathed, and all made up of patchwork and tawdry fragments of silk and velvet, covered with glass beads—and a huge Chippeway they called Jim; the mother weaving a basket and the man shaping a bow. While watching these, he saw looks interchanged, and heard whisperings, which made him draw a little nearer. His blood was up, and he soon saw that he was recognized by the young officer, and he thought by Oonanee herself, for he saw the color flash up to her cheeks, as he glanced at her little feet, cuddled up under her in the soft grass. He waited and waited till the company had all gone, except the two

young officers, hoping to get a peep at her eyes; but no, not once did she look up, and her short black hair, black as death, fell about her face in such careless profusion, that he could only guess at the features. That she was very beautiful, and modest and shy, and probably a half-breed, and perhaps educated by the nuns at Montreal, so far at least as the bead-work was concerned, he felt sure. Having satisfied himself on these points, and made the purchase of a bullet-pouch for his father, he was turning to go away, when his attention was arrested by a slight scream, and by what sounded like a struggle. He turned to see what the matter was. The young officer he had well-nigh throttled in the morning, had one hand under the poor girl's chin, and was trying to lift it up, as if to get a good look at her face, while his companion stood by laughing. The outrage brought the young creature to her feet with the suddenness and fierceness of a spotted panther. '*Ma miè!*' she cried, and before anybody could interfere, though half a dozen, at least, of the loiterers hurried up at the cry, there was a sudden flash—a blow, which her hand was lifted to repeat, when Smith caught her by the wrist—and the wounded officer staggered away, and fell with his whole length upon the grass.

“‘Oonance! Oonance!’ shouted the Chippeway, just as the young officer, raising himself on one elbow, called out:

“‘Back with you! back with you all! Touch her not for your life!’

“The old woman leaped to her feet and came forward by successive springs, with her coarse black hair streaming wildly on the breeze, and all her showy rags fluttering like torn banners; and the huge Ojibbeway, whom we call the Chippeway, sprung forward with what sounded like a distant, half-smothered war-whoop.

“‘The fault was mine! I’ve got no more than I deserve—tell them so, George,’ continued the officer. ‘Say it was an accident—ah, a boyish frolic on my part, or they will have her away to prison. God help the fools!’

“‘Are you much hurt, Will?’ said the other, trying to lift him up and set him on his feet.

“‘No, not much,’—putting his hand to his side—‘but the bleeding must be stopped;’ and thrusting his hand into his

bosom, he pulled out a handkerchief wet with blood. 'Hush, hush!' he added, as he saw his companion's look of alarm, and the sudden paleness that followed. 'Get the poor girl away, George, and leave the rest to me.'

"After a little time, arrangements were made of a satisfactory nature to all parties. The mother sat on the grass with the head of her child in her lap, rocking to and fro, and moaning over her with a low, musical chant; and the big Ojibbeway seemed to be on the best of terms with Peter, whom he now recollected as the champion at a wrestling-match. After a few words of caution to the bystanders, young Smith left the spot, saying, as he moved away, what his name was, and where he might be found, if he should be wanted for a witness; for he had seen the whole affair, he said, and the young girl was not in fault.

"She looked up and followed him with her eyes, but said nothing; and he went on his way with that lazy, slouching air which he seemed to put on and off with his every-day country clothes, and after clearing the encampment, broke into his old Indian loup, and never looked behind him till he reached the cabin of an old French *habitan* he had long been acquainted with.

"Years after this, while wandering about hither and thither, on both sides of the line, without any settled purpose, his father only hearing of him, and never from him, wherever there was a great gathering for any purpose—the rebellion broke out in Canada."

"Ah-ha! that's coming to the point!" whispered Perry: "Now we shall have the explanation we've been waiting for."

"Hush!—hush!" whispered the captain; and then there was a prolonged cock-a-doodle-doo! from Charley, which set them all off again.

"Of course," continued the major, without noticing the interruption—"of course our friend Peter must have a finger in the pie; and after it was all over, and the President's proclamation was out, and the insurgents had been thrashed, and retreated to Navy Island, the old folks found out, nobody ever knew how, that Peter had been a ringleader in the business, and was in two or three smart skirmishes--battles they were

then called, though we should think little of them now—and that a price had been set upon his head. It was even reported, and believed, that he was on board the ‘Caroline’ when she was boarded and set fire to, and sent over the Falls at midnight.”

Perry pricked up his ears at this, and, hitching a little nearer, he muttered, with a half-smothered cry of anguish, “On the 29th of December, 1837, hey?” grasping the major’s thigh with preternatural energy, as he spoke.

“But,” continued the major, with increasing solemnity, as he nodded in reply, “that was all a mistake; for though he joined the insurgents and was in two or three rough-and-tumble fights with them, and had much to do in carrying over supplies and men from Fort Schlosser, still he was not on board when the attack was made by Captain Drew.”

“Thank God! thank God!” exclaimed Perry, drawing a long breath, and looking up as if a great load had been suddenly lifted from his heart, while he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, and almost blubbered outright. “But how happened it?—how did he manage to escape?”

A dead silence followed, which continued until it grew not only embarrassing, but painful; and for a few minutes it seemed as if the Old Forester had forgotten the whole story. At last, however, he was brought to himself by the shuffling of many feet, and on looking up, he found all eyes fixed upon him, and even poor Charley Frost leaning forward, with his mouth wide open, looking uncommonly serious and attentive.

“Well—to make a long story short—it seems that arrangements had been made for sending supplies and maintaining communication with the insurgents on that very night. Young Smith had a few trusty men partly engaged; but they did not appear in season—”

“Did not appear in season! Who were they? Could you give their names?”

“Not all; but I remember a few.”

“Was there anybody of my name among them?”

The major considered a few moments, and then said, while rubbing his forehead and looking into the fire, “As I live! I think there was—let me see—Perry—Perry?—was his name Eli?”

"Yes—a tall, handsome fellow, with large, grayish-blue eyes, and light hair."

"Yes: I saw him there myself. I remember him perfectly

"*You!*—you saw him there *yourself!* Why, who on earth are you? and what business had you there?"

"Oh-ho!" muttered Charley, with a low whistle.

"Let me finish," continued the major, without changing countenance, though he turned away somewhat hurriedly from the searching eyes of Perry, and the giggling leer of Charley.

"Yes, my friends, yes; I will not deny it. I was one of the twenty-three strangers who went on board the 'Caroline' to sleep that night—"

"To sleep!"

"Yes—not being able to find lodgings ashore. Most of them, and perhaps all but five or six, were wholly ignorant of the purpose we had in view. I am sure of this; for I talked freely with them in the early part of the evening, when they first came aboard; and well do I remember what young Perry said, and how he looked, when they began telling stories about a farmer-boy who turned out to be our young friend Smith—Peter Smith.

"Well," continued the major, after taking breath and a whiff o' the pipe, "most of the strangers had turned in. There was no watch on deck, and I was waiting to hear from the fellows who had promised to be there. At last, I concluded to go after them—"

"Stop there, if you please. Look at me!—did you ever see me before?" said Perry.

"I think I have—yes—but where I can not say for the life of me."

"Among the men you expected, was there not one by the name of Hutchins?"

"There certainly was. Now that you have mentioned his name, I remember it perfectly."

"Well, sir, that was the name I took. The notice left for me was received by poor Arthur, while I was away after the others, and—and—he took my place!—and I never knew a word of it until the affair was all over—but go on! go on! I can bear any thing now," covering his face with both hands,

while his broad, manly chest heaved with uncontrollable emotion—"God forgive me!—any thing!"

"Well, then," said the major, "as I was a—"

"One moment, if you please. Ever since we first met, I have been haunted with a notion that I had seen you somewhere, many years ago—I could not remember where, but the name puzzled me—I had never been acquainted with a person of your name."

"The name I went by there was Lothrop."

"Ah! I see—I see!—it all comes to me now like a flash of lightning! and now—you'll excuse me—when you mentioned the 29th of December, and spoke of the rush of waters, and told us the dreadful sound was in your ears night and day, it struck me all of a heap, somehow. I felt as if none but the guilty could be troubled in that way; and it seemed as if God had given into my hands one of the murderers—the cowardly miscreants!—to butcher, in cold blood, a score of unarmed, sleeping travelers, and set the vessel on fire, and send her over the Falls! But the day of retribution must come! and the cry of *no quarter! no quarter!* will ring in their ears at the judgment seat of God! if not before."

"I understand you now, my dear sir," said the major, brushing away a tear. "Let us be friends. Perhaps you may remember something of Peter Smith?"

"No, sir—can't say I do. He was away most of the time recruiting. I never saw him but once, and that was through a window, as he called, on horseback, to leave a notice for me—I never heard the name of Smith—but there were all sorts of stories about the farmer-boy, and if I knew his real name, perhaps I might be able to recall his looks—"

"Indeed!—well, never mind his real name for the present. All in good time."

"I remember that he was very tall, as tall as you are, I should say, and one of the handsomest fellows you ever clapped eyes on."

"Have you ever met with him since—or heard of him?"

"Not to my knowledge; and yet—stay—I do remember hearing that he had been elected a chief—that he run off with a beautiful half-breed, whom all the officers in the garrison

were dead in love with, and that nothing was ever heard of them afterwards. But I beg your pardon; please go on with your story."

"Well, if you say so. It was a very dark night, and while some were away after the stragglers, Peter went down to the wharf, and while standing there and watching what seemed to be signal lights on the opposite shore, something approached him—a shadow—coming out from behind a pile of boards without a sound or a whisper, and flung a paper at his feet and instantly disappeared. There were only two or three lines in a female hand, saying, that no time was to be lost, that mischief was brewing—and that a friend with a sleigh was waiting at the cross-roads, where the particulars would be communicated. Wrapping himself up in his fur robe and looking to his weapons, he hurried away to the place appointed, where he found a stranger of uncommon size waiting for him, with a pair of young horses harnessed to a wagon-box on runners.

"'Jump in! jump in!' said the stranger, in a voice that Smith instantly recognized for that of his old friend the Ojibbeway, and then shaking the reins, and flourishing his large wagon-whip crack after crack, till it sounded like pistol-firing, he set off through the deep snow into the great black wilderness, at a tearing pace.

"Nobody spoke till Peter, in changing his position, touched something in the bottom of the sleigh, which moved away of itself.

"'Hullo!' said he, 'what have we here?' And he was just going to give it a kick, when the driver said, with a sound something between a grunt and a laugh, 'Better not.'

"Supposing it might be a dog—and your thoroughbred Indian dogs are not to be trifled with—he forbore; and after a while, asked how far?

"'Better'n six miles,' was the reply. And away sprung the high spirited horses, with bound after bound, lifting the sleigh over the snow, as if it were made of birch-bark, and plunging into the darkness beyond, as if they knew every inch of the way.

"'Hush, now—hush—here um be; down, Pomp, down!' said the driver, as they suddenly turned and came whirling

up alongside of a log hut, with the door standing ajar, and a strong light, as from a large fire, streaming over the drifted snow, with two or three eager faces peering out into the darkness, and half a dozen savage-looking dogs—more like wolves than dogs—yelping and barking and snapping at every crack of the whip. The sleigh stopped with a lurch that nearly emptied it, the driver sprung from his seat up to his middle in the snow—a shadow followed—and the next moment he found himself inside the lodge, face to face with the mother of Oonanee, sitting on a litter of cedar-branches, and looking up at him with a hideous leer. Before he could speak, the shadow shot by him, almost near enough to touch his elbow, and then sprung away into the darkness beyond. The old woman laughed—and the giant Ojibbeway grunted—and then, he heard from the furthest corner, a sort of giggle, and he became satisfied that the shadow was Oonanee herself.”

“By jings, I thought so!” exclaimed Charley.

“Hold your yop, Charley!” said Hannaford, trying to clap his hand over Charley’s mouth again.

“Yes, Polly, to be sure—Polly got the pip, hey—Polly want breakfast?”

“Silence there!” said Gage, “*silence!* Go on with your story, Major Dyer.”

“With all my heart—I am nearly through—bear with me for a few minutes. A conversation followed, from which it appeared that Oonanee, who came forward and took his hand and kissed it, had followed Colonel McNab and Captain Drew, who had command of the expedition, to a Chippeway lodge, where she overheard all the arrangements for destroying the Caroline the last night of the year; and happening to know that her friend Peter was aboard, she lost no time in communicating with her brother, who lay concealed on the American side. The Chippeways had been counted among our deadliest foes; but Jim had found his way to Navy Island at an early stage of the rebellion, and was known to be a great admirer of Smith ever since what he called the “wrastlin’-match,” where he threw the Cornish champion, by pitching him over his head, and broke the leg of the Devonshire lad, the pet of the garrison. Of course, they were narrowly watched, and the mother and daughter especially, from the time they

disappeared. No longer a child of wonderful beauty, with just enough Indian blood in her to ripen early, she was now a woman—gloriously developed, with large, laughing eyes, and imperious bearing—a leopard in her graceful, undulating movements, a tigress in her wrath. That she had not been a murderess indeed, was owing to the hand she had just kissed so lovingly, and her look said so, as she went up to the side of Smith and listened to their hurried arrangements.

“There was indeed no time to lose. The expedition was to consist of nearly a hundred men armed to the teeth; and for aught they knew, though fixed for the last day of the year, it might be under way at this very moment.

“‘God help us if it should be so!’ said Peter, as the thought crossed his mind—‘but why not tell me all this, Oonanee dear, instead of taking me away off into the woods?’

“Oonanee smiled—and then, for the first time, it flashed over Smith’s mind, that her whole object was to get him out of the danger.

“‘The sleigh! the sleigh! God forgive you, Oonanee, if I should be too late!’ said he.

“Into the sleigh they sprung. The whip cracked and rattled, the snow sparkled, and just as they whirled round the outskirts of a wide clearing, they saw afar off what appeared to be the beginning of a great fire in the direction of the village.

“‘Lay on the whip, Jim!—lay it on for your life!’ screamed Peter. ‘Make them spring to it—or we may be too late, after all! See! see! the scoundrels are upon us, and have probably fired the village. Hurrah, there! hurrah! Give it to ’em!’

“The horses were doing their best; and as the roar of the Falls grew louder, the fire, which seemed moving to meet them half-way, grew redder and fiercer. Signals went up. Occasional musket-shots were heard—then two or three volleys, and then the booming of heavy cannon from the Canada shore—with shouting and screams of horror and wild hurrahs—growing louder and louder at every plunge of the furious young horses.”

“Great God! Almighty Father!” murmured Perry, throwing himself back on the pile of cedar-branches, and trembling all over and moaning piteously.

“As they came all at once in sight of the Falls, they saw

the apparition of a vessel on fire—with sails and colors flying away in fragments, and balancing just in the pitch for a few minutes, and then plunging with a great leap into the dread abyss below.”

Here Perry could bear it no longer. He sprung to his feet, and fiercely brandishing his arms toward the great, black, midnight sky, stood looking up, as if he saw the apparition of that vessel on fire, and heard his poor brother screaming for help. “Ten thousand curses on them! and on their children’s children forever!” he cried, and then settled down helplessly upon the pile of cedar-branches, and spoke not another word, till the night had passed, and the light of another day broke upon them like the smile of congregated angels.

“And over they went!” continued the forester; “and I am sure I heard screaming to the last; and I know that only twenty-two bodies were found out of thirty-three that were on board. That I had a wonderful escape, I acknowledge.”

“*You!*—*you!* Why, what had you to do with the business?” asked Gage.

“What had I to do with the business!—you forget, my good sir, that I was away after the rest of my men.”

“True, true—I had forgotten that part of the story; but you spoke of sails—I have always understood she was a steamer.”

“She was; but carried two large sails as a matter of precaution. These were run up, when she was set fire to, and towed off into the stream, and they continued blazing and flying off in fragments and flashes, till she went over with a great leap into the gulf. But enough—my story is ended—good-night.”

“One word, if you please, major. The boys want to know what became of Smith—I can see it in their eyes.”

“Of Smith, hey?—ah, yes—to be sure! Well, the story they told of him was, that he was adopted by the tribe to which Oonance belonged by parentage—the Ottawas; and that after awhile he married that beautiful creature, whom he loved to distraction—so that he could not bear to have her seen by the white officers about. They say, too, that he took up with the Indian habits and garb, and spent all his time for several years hunting and fishing, till he had a daughter old enough to show that she would be even more beautiful than her mother, when they all disappeared together, and nothing

has been heard of them from that day to this; though it has been whispered about, within the last year or two, that they are living by themselves, out of the white man's reach, and far away from the haunts of the red-man. Are you satisfied?"

"Yes, indeed—I am—we all are—good-night!"

CHAPTER III.

THE BULL MOOSE.

By the end of another week there was a great thaw; heavy rains had fallen, the snow had settled; the lumbering highways were all clear, and the by-paths were all sloppy with the continual passage of logs. Never was the prospect more encouraging, and all the teamsters and choppers and loggers were half crazy with expectation. The cattle, too, having been sheltered and cared for, as if they were a part of the family, were in the best possible condition. That "a merciful man is merciful to his beast," seems to be a part of the New Englander's belief, though it may not be found in his creed. Exceptions are to be found, of course—for the ignorant and short-sighted starve themselves and their families, and leave their houses, like their barns, just above the freezing point; and the wretched, half-starved cattle they pretend to keep, with staring coats, lank bodies and lifeless tails, testify openly against their wicked and foolish masters.

A strange people are the backwoodsmen of the Pine-tree State—a peculiar people, and zealous of good works, though not always of the best. Ignorant of their own strength, wholly unacquainted with themselves, and with their own capabilities, till some great occasion arises, when they undergo the most wonderful, and the suddenest transformations ever heard of.

The blacksmith, standing over his forge in the thick of the wilderness, tears off his leather apron, and flings down the lifted sledge, like General Greene; and the teamster, like

Putnam, leaves the plow in the furrow and the cattle standing in the field—no matter where he is, nor what his qualifications may be—at the first cry of his country to arms! to arms! No, no; the revolutionary type is not extinct, and wherever the New-England blood is found in the veins of men, there these transfigurations happen every day, as at the blast of a trumpet, East, West, North and South.

All winter long, our friends have been out, piling up trees which they have trimmed of their branches, and hauled into some dry gorge, at the head of some water-course; and then, says Thoreau, the lumberman “stands on the bank and whistles for rain and thaw, ready to wring the perspiration out of his shirt to swell the tide, till suddenly, with a whoop and halloo from him * * a fair proportion of his winter’s work goes scrambling down the country toward the Orono mills.”

“But how do they know their own logs?” asked a visitor at camp Gage, “when they get all mixed up together on their way to the mills?”

“Every man has a private mark, which is cut into the sap-wood with an ax, or bored with an auger. These are belts, crosses, crow-feet, girdles, etc.; as, for example, Y—cross—crowfoot. And these private marks are acknowledged, just as the letters ‘I. O. U.’ are on ‘Change.’”

“Are not many of these logs lost on the way?” continued the stranger.

“Yes, indeed—they are often left high and dry for years, and some are stranded for life, waiting for a still higher freshet; but all that escape are got together at the head of the lakes, and surrounded with a boom of floating logs, and then towed like a flock of sheep across the lake, where there is no current, by a windlass or boom-head. Sometimes the logs are scattered for miles and miles upon the lake and along the distant shores, where the driver can only pick them up, one or two at a time, and before he gets his flock well through Ambejijis or Pamadumcook, he makes many a wet and uncomfortable camp on the shore.”

At this moment, the stranger looked up from his low seat before the bed of live coals, and found Gage reading all this from a book—“The Woods of Maine,” by Thoreau. Both smiled, and Gage continued for a few minutes longer:

“He must be able to navigate a log as if it were a canoe, and be as indifferent to cold and wet as a muskrat,” continued Gage, still reading from the book. “He uses a few efficient tools—a lever, commonly of rock-maple, six or seven feet long, with a stout spike in it, strongly feruled on, and a long spiked pole, with a screw at the end of the spike, to make it hold. The boys along shore learn to walk on floating logs, as city boys on sidewalks.’ Here—read for yourself, and you will find your questions all answered on the best authority,” added Gage, at the same time laying the book on the stranger’s knee.

“But, I say, Cap’n Gage—where the plague is our purveyor, think you?—and Juba—where is he?” asked Perry.

Gage looked troubled. This was the tenth day since two of their party, Fletcher and Juba, had gone off on a hunting expedition; and up to this hour, nothing had been heard of them.

“If I had not the greatest confidence in Fletcher,” said Gage in reply—“if I did not know him to be the very best hunter in all this part of the world, and thoroughly acquainted with all the hiding-places of the great northern wilderness, I should begin to feel rather anxious about him.”

“But the heavy snow, and the sudden thaw, and the rains we have had, like another deluge, day after day, must be too much for a frame like his,” urged Perry.

“A frame like his! Why, my dear sir, that delicately-fashioned young man, looking more like a woman than like what he is, will stand more hardship, and come out further ahead in a death-grapple, than either of us—ay, than any of us, except the major.”

“*The land!*” exclaimed Charley, hiding his face behind his next neighbor, and yelping like a puppy-dog.

“He has the strength and lightness of a leopard; and always reminds me in the play of his muscles, under strong excitement, of the elephant’s trunk, or a boa-constrictor—so lithe and playful, and yet so dangerous.”

“I have heard of him before,” said the major. “He was taken for a divinity student at first, being so gentlemanly and delicate, and so they called him Miss Nancy. But when they knew more of him, and saw what he was capable of, and

heard some of the strange stories the country is so full of, they christened him anew, the young Nimrod."

"Yes—and now they call him everywhere, Nim Fletcher."

"But," continued Gage, "there is another consideration we must not overlook. That nigger, Juba, is worth his weight in gold. If any thing had happened to either, we should have known it from the other, unless, to be sure, he couldn't leave his comrade to communicate with us; and all we have to do now is, to wait patiently and hope for the best. Why, bless my soul! there he is, now!—and Juba too, as I live! and both loaded down with moose-meat, or cariboo, or something of the sort! Well, Fletcher, how are you?—what luck?—and where *have* you been! And Juba, too! how are you, my boy?"

"Something to eat first, if you please, and we'll consider all your questions," said Fletcher, dropping into a seat as he spoke, while the two large dogs he brought with him crawled under the benches and lay watching him.

"Goody, gorry mightee, Marsa Gage! how's ole Juba gwyin' to know how he be, afore he gits thawed out?—yah! yah!"

"Come to the fire, Juba—take the deacon's seat," said George. "And I say, boys, lug out your best; for the poor fellows are half starved, I see."

"Nothin' but skin an' bones," whispered Charley.

After a pull at the cider, while tea was brewing, Fletcher hung up his rifle and shot-pouch, and seizing what Juba called a hunk of fat pork, about the size of your fist, and a huge cut of rye-and-Indian bread, and bidding Juba help himself, and lose no more time, he proceeded with his account of all that had happened while they were away on the tramp.

He had been very successful, and all along their way, for fifty or a hundred miles, they would find the game he had killed hanging on the trees, out of reach of every thing but the cougar and wild-cat, or loup cervier. They had been lost for a time, and were completely snowed up at another. They had been, too, in a part of the wilderness entirely new to him, though not a day's journey from the camp; and here he suddenly stopped, and lowering his voice, he touched Gage on the elbow, and whispered that something very curious had

happened, which—and here he made a sign to Juba, whose eyes were rolling about in every direction, as if he couldn't hold in much longer, not to open his mouth.

Not willing to be overheard, Gage moved away from the others, and Fletcher followed him, and whispered that he had seen a small moccasin-track running along the highest ridge he was acquainted with, for mile after mile, adding that he had followed it through a region of wilderness, and rock, and swamp, and river entirely new to him, till Juba gave out, and threw himself down upon the wet snow, and asked to be left there to die. From that hour his whole time had been spent in cheering and strengthening the poor fellow. They had crept into the holes of the rocks, and Fletcher built for him a comfortable bed and a rousing fire, and managed to get up a roasted rabbit, served in a birch-bark platter, with forks of alder twigs, and a tin dipper of real black tea, without milk or sugar, instead of cedar-tea or hemlock-tea. Upon this diet poor Juba soon recovered his strength, and only two days before had insisted on returning to camp.

"How far have you come to-day?" said Gage.

"Not over eight or ten miles."

"Indeed!"—pulling out his watch—"and how far from here should we have to go to strike the moccasin-track?"

"Not over twelve miles, certainly."

"To-morrow, then, if you please, we will set off together, and see what comes of it."

"To-morrow, sir! Why not to-day?—why not this moment? *You* are all fresh, I see."

"Yes; but how can you bear another such tramp, after all you have had to undergo? You want a good long rest—and poor Juba—what shall we do with him?"

"Leave him where he is, poor fellow; he is thoroughly knocked up, and he wouldn't be worth a cheese-paring for the purpose you have in view."

"Well, sir, I don't wonder they liken you to the proboscis of an elephant. How soon will you be ready?"

"I'm ready now, sir"—grabbing another unshapely lump of pork or corned beef, and cramming two or three cold potatoes and a supply of hard-tack into his game-bag, he started to his feet.

"Halloo! where now?" said the major.

"After game," said Fletcher—"good-by til we meet again!—here, Tiger, here!—this way, Snapper!"—grasping his rifle and arranging his bullet-pouch. And off he started, followed by both dogs, Fletcher leading the way, and Gage following, as if both had set in for a long day's work, leaving their companions all silent, and looking at one another as if each were unwilling to speak first. Among them was one whose look of troubled curiosity grew deeper and deeper every moment. At one time he seemed to be on the point of following them, for he gathered up his blanket and drew the belt about his waist with uncommon strength; and, while looking out of the open door, and following with his eyes the pair who had just left them, he reached up his hand for a rifle hanging just over his bed, and then stopped suddenly, and seated himself in a far corner, as if he had given up the idea.

It was a wearisome tramp, and Fletcher and Gage held on their way, hour after hour, without a word of conversation, till Fletcher suddenly stopped—listened—looked at the cap on his rifle, and then called in the dogs and made them lie down in the snow by signs they were evidently accustomed to.

"What is it?" said Gage—"what do you hear?"

"I don't know—hush—that seems to be the yelping of a dog!" And so thought the dogs, for they pricked up their ears, and threw up their noses, and grew very uneasy.

They were just passing a dark and very deep gorge, over which a pine-tree had fallen, making a natural bridge of more than a hundred feet in length.

After a few moments, they heard a tremendous clattering, and, before they had time to consult together, it seemed to be almost upon them.

Fletcher seized Gage by the arm, and whispered: "Keep cool—reserve your fire—let me have the first pop! and, if I don't fetch him, do you let fly just back of the fore-shoulder."

"Ay, ay!" said Gage.

"Ah, here he comes!—now for it!—stand fast, and after he gets on the bridge, where he can't turn, we'll show ourselves,

and then there is no help for it. He must charge, or die in his tracks."

"Charge!—and what is to become of us, pray, if he gets over the bridge?" asked the captain.

"But he won't get over the bridge; and, if he should, the dogs will keep him busy till we are treed, and then let him beware!"

While he was yet speaking, a very large bull moose, a magnificent creature, with antlers overtopping the birches that grew on the river-bank, came with a leisurely trot over the fallen trees and log fences toward the further end of the bridge. There he stopped and took a survey of the neighborhood—the wind was favorable to our hunters, the baying of the dog, if it was a dog, had died away—and threw up his head, as if listening; and then he laid back his broad antlers, and stood as if preparing for another charge upon the great wilderness by opening a path for himself ten or twelve feet wide through the tangled undergrowth.

At last, after a little further consideration, throwing up his head two or three times, as if not altogether satisfied with appearances at the other end of the bridge, he set his foot upon the log, and snorted, and then took his way over it with a slow, regular trot. Having reached the middle, the two dogs were let loose. Another appeared on the edge of the bank—a small, thievish-looking Indian cur. Fletcher flung himself forward with a scream—Gage followed—the poor animal stood for a moment confused and trembling, and then tried to return upon his tracks—Fletcher fired—the moose reared and balanced for a moment, and then pitched headlong into the gulf below.

"Enough!" said Fletcher—"we must leave him there, if we hope to get our other business off our hands before night-fall."

"Agreed! Let us finish that job first—but just look o' there!"

The Indian dog was stealing away with his tail between his legs, and Snapper standing on the butt of the log and yelling after him; while Tiger, being much older and larger, and somewhat more magnanimous, kept up a low, growling underbase till the stranger was lost in the woods.

"But where do you suppose that whelp came from?" asked Gage.

"Not knowing, can't say; but I have my susp'cions."

"Ah!—what are they?"

"Well, I think that cur has something to do with the moccasin-track, which, by the 'way, we shall reach within half an hour, if we spring to it."

"Spring to it 'tis, then!—push ahead!"

Leaving our adventurers on the track for awhile, with every thing to encourage them, let us now go back to camp.

The major is sitting in a corner by himself, and seems half asleep. Ferry has grown rather more communicative—the uncouth Hannaford is lying all abroad over the piles of cedar and hemlock—and all the rest are poking fun at poor Charley.

"What are ye at there, Charley, my boy?" said one of the crew.

"What am I at, precious!—making a cat's cradle for the deacon."

"Oh, bonner!—what are you whittling there?"

"Gittin' up a baby-jumper for Hannaford."

This was too much, and even the major was said to have smiled, but he turned quickly away, while Perry laughed outright. And so the hours went by—most of the crew whistling and smoking—some playing fox and geese, or morris, or checkers, with red and white corn, or beans and coffee; and still nothing is heard of the captain.

Arrangements are in progress for supper—and such a supper!—moose-lip and tongue, rabbits, grouse, brown bread, pork and beans, potted salmon, the best of butter and molasses by the cup-full.

But darkness comes—the deepest winter darkness, overclouded and starless; you can hardly see your hand before you. The men grow uneasy, and at last the major wakes up, and proposes to light torches and scour the neighborhood in search of the two absentees, the material, pitch-wood and birch-bark, being all at hand. Not that there was any danger of their being lost or entrapped; but their mysterious departure and the uncertainty of their object seemed to disturb them all, and especially the Old Forester.

To this proposition all agreed, and just as they were about

setting off in different directions, they heard a rifle-shot, and then a bark, a long way off.

"There goes Tiger!" said Charley, jumping up, and clapping his hands together; and, as they all rushed to the door, Fletcher and the captain appeared, wet, weary, and silent as the grave.

The major asked no questions; but all could see that he was not a little anxious to know where they had been, and what had happened.

"Come! hurrah, there! hurrah! supper's ready!" shouted the chief cook; and they all turn to, and for half an hour, nothing is to be heard but the clatter of tin-cups, the rustling of birchen plates, the under-growling of the dogs, and the loud breathing of broad-chested men—"rust up to here."

At last, having finished their supper, Gage broke silence long enough to tell them about the moose, and where they would find him; at which the old hunter pricked up his ears and seemed to be most unaccountably moved; and then they all turned in for the night.

CHAPTER IV.

MYSTERIOUS APPEARANCES—THE HUNTER HUNTED.

THE next day the heavens were cloudless, the sun exceedingly bright, and the sky so blue and clear that, although there was little or nothing to do abroad, it was quite impossible to stay in camp, and so, after talking the matter over it was agreed that all who could be spared—that is, all but Juba Charley—who managed to get away without leave—and the cook, should start off on a hunting-expedition, two or three together. Tracks had been met with everywhere—tracks of wolves, and foxes, and cariboo, and some thought of bears, to say nothing of moose-tracks, which were found so plentiful near one "yard," which they did not go near lest the animals should take fright, as to make the whole neighborhood look like a cattle-yard.

Soon after they started, Fletcher brought down a brace of partridges, at a single shot, as they rose whirring at such a distance that Gage refused to offer to fire first.

"Capital!" cried Gage. "I have heard of *stringing* wild geese with a single ball, and I have seen some pretty fair shooting in my day with a double-barreled shot-gun; but never any thing like that, I must acknowledge. Was it an accident?"

"Not altogether. I felt sure of one, and by running a little ris'n and waiting till they were in line, I believed I might fetch both. I have done so many times in my life."

"But we must not be led off in this way," said Gage, striking out boldly toward the nearest river-bank.

"Right, Captain Gage, right; and once on the trail of the little moccasin-track, we shall know just how much time we have to spare." And away both struck, toward a path running along under a growth of enormous pines, leading, after a while, into the very heart of the wilderness—followed by they little knew what; for hunters are sometimes hunted, you know.

"Upon my word," continued Gage, after another half-hour's tramp, "upon my word, Fletcher, I almost wish we had taken the dogs with us. We might find them of use before we get through."

"Of use!—in what way?"

"In starting our game."

"The very reason I left them with the boys. Once frightened by the dogs, the little moccasin would be likely to leave this neighborhood and take to another hiding-place."

Meanwhile the Old Forester, for reasons which did not appear, had been following on the track of our two hunters and though he had lost sight of them two or three times, yet he had always managed, with the unerring instinct of a blood-hound, to recover the trail, until his attention was called off by what seemed like a shadow, often motionless for several minutes, high up among the far tree-branches, and then moving swiftly away, so that he was unable to follow it, even with his eye. Nor could he get near enough to satisfy himself as to its true character, until, on coming to a bend of the river, he caught a glimpse of the creature, whatever it

was, lying stretched out on the lowest limb of a huge, thunder-blasted oak, and instantly it came over him like a flash of lightning that the animal was a catamount, following his prey. His *prey*!—and then he recollected that he had entirely lost sight of the two hunters.

He now tried to get near the beast, without being seen; and after some winding and turning in and out among the trees, he found himself within a fair rifle-range. But where was the prey? He caught the flash of the creature's large, yellow eyes; he saw a slight motion of the tail, and was just ready to draw a bead upon him, when, at a little distance ahead, he saw two other shadows crouching and stealing away into the darkness beyond.

Were these our two hunters? Before he could answer the question to himself, the creature he had been watching rose up, with a sort of moaning cry, which might well have been mistaken for that of a human being in distress—a melancholy wail, such as often misleads the inexperienced, and bounded off in the direction of the two shadows—running and leaping from branch to branch, and up the tallest of the trees, like a shadow—noiseless, and oftentimes motionless for minutes together.

And now, what was to be done? If he fired off his gun as a signal, it would betray him to the hunters, and might not be understood by them, after all; and he had his reasons for wishing to be unsuspected. Still, he could hardly reconcile it to his manhood to leave them unapprised of their dangerous proximity to the fiercest, and by far the most dangerous of our forest prowlers, the cougar—she being so treacherous and stealthy, and capable of such astonishing leaps, resembling the anaconda, indeed, in the suddenness and unexpectedness of her movements, when she flings herself upon her prey.

It was evident enough that the creature was following some kind of prey; and yet she lingered so much, and so frequently diverged from what seemed to be the course of the hunters, that our Old Forester began to believe that she had something else in view.

Just as he reached this conclusion, he caught another glimpse of the hunters—yes, there could be no mistake now:

they were not two rifle-shots off and stood together as if in consultation, or listening.

The major determined to get as near them as he could without being seen; and cutting across the wide sweep which separated them, he soon found himself within short rifle-range, and was making up his mind what to do next—for he wanted to overhear their conversation, and seemed to grow more and more uneasy about their object—when the breaking of a dry branch overhead made him look up, and there he saw the fearful creature, lying flat on a prodigious hemlock branch, bristling all over, with eyes like lighted jacinths, and just ready for a spring at something he could not see.

Before he took another step, there was a movement among the shrubbery below, just where the two hunters had been holding their consultation; his rifle dropped into his left hand without noise—and then there was a little stirring, an exclamation of surprise from Gage, a low, savage growl, ending in a snarl, enough to make your very blood run cold; and then, just as the creature flung itself headlong through the hemlock branches upon her prey, there was a rifle-shot from below, instantly followed by another, like an echo, from the major; and the creature, catching by one arm on her way through the spreading lower limbs, hung for a minute, writhing and yelling, and then fell upon the snow.

Astonished beyond measure at the sound of the second shot—so sudden and so timely—Fletcher and Gage were looking about in every direction to see where it had come from, utterly regardless of their terrible foe as she lay there struggling in her death-agony, and tearing up the ice and snow at every sweep of her tremendous paws, after a fashion that appalled even these experienced hunters. But nothing was to be seen; there was neither life nor motion to betray the hiding-place of the major, though he was now within a rod or two at the furthest, and lying flat on the snow, among the tangled undergrowth.

“Timely help, I must acknowledge,” said Fletcher, pointing as he spoke to the under jaw of the catamount, broken by his ball. “See!”—turning the creature over—“that is where I meant to have hit her, but her charge and my compliments must have been so near together, hang her! that she

must have lifted her head about an inch in leaping. A narrow escape, indeed! though, as you see, I sprung aside the instant I had fired; but one of his confounded paws might have reached me in passing, nevertheless."

"But where on earth is our deliverer? Why does he not show himself?" asked Gage.

"Capital shot, hey?—look here!"—and he thrust his finger into a large hole near the creature's heart—"ugh!" and both huddled, as they acknowledged again, each looking into the other's face, how narrow had been their escape, and how timely the shot.

"Still," said Fletcher, "I don't half like this—we hunters are brethren, and I hate all mystery."

"Oh! it's one of our crew," said Gage, "and just for the fun o' the thing, he doesn't mean to be known till ~~we~~ we get back to the wigwam, and tell our story our own way."

"But I say, Captain Gage, have you many in your crew equal to a shot like that?"

Gage shook his head. "Not more ~~than~~ two or three, certainly; but I say, though,"—looking at his watch—"hadn't we better push ahead?"

"By all means—ahead it is!"

And off they started once more, the Old Forester following them at such a distance that he had nothing to fear.

After a long tramp, during which he always kept them in view, they turned away from the woods, entered a swamp, and finally were seen making their way along the top of a ridge, where they stopped several times and looked about in every direction, as if on the track of something.

As he followed along the same ridge, and stopped and looked about him, and examined the snow, he was startled by the appearance of a small moccasin-track, and with it, here and there, the print of a dog's foot. Could these be the objects they were examining so carefully on their way?

And now they strike off toward the north, evidently following some kind of a trail; for they diverge right and left from their general course, at long intervals, and appear to be looking for signs; and when they take up their march, it is always in the same direction—just about due north.

"Very strange!" said the major to himself; "but—all in good time. If I find it necessary, we shall soon come to a right understanding. The gentleman hates mystery, does he?—well, so do I; and above all, such a mystery as we are now trying to get to the bottom of." And he laughed to himself, occasionally tapping a tree with his hatchet, as he went by, or snapping a twig, or bending the top of a bush in the direction they had taken.

At length, however, he came suddenly to a full stop, and stood awhile, as if debating with himself; and then, after measuring the distance that separated them, with a swift, hurried glance, he started away in quite another direction, as if designing to head them off, with a long, wearisome tramp.

"Halloo! what's that?" exclaimed Gage, at the end of another hour, stopping a little in advance of Fletcher, who was examining another footprint. "Hist!"—dropping his gun, without hurry or noise, into the hollow of his left arm, and looking at the cap.

"Hh! Who goes there?" shouted Fletcher.

"A friend!" was the answer.

"Advance, friend, and give the countersign."

"Thunder and lightning!" answered a voice from a thicket just ahead of them; and the next moment, forth issued the Old Forester, smoking with perspiration and almost out of breath. He had doubled upon them, it appeared, to some purpose.

"Ah, major! is that you? What luck?"

"Pretty fair, on the whole, though I have had the mischief to pay in trying to head you off, and am almost done up, as you see."

"Well, and why did you want to head us off?"

"How would you like a supper of bear-steak?"

"Above all things!—but what do you mean?"

"Mean! I mean that I have treed a bear, and if you had been with me, or the dogs, we might have had some sport."

"A bear! at this season of the year—in the dead of winter! Why, he would be hardly worth killing," said Gage, "except for his pelt."

"Generally speaking, you are right," said the major; "but in this particular case, you will find an exception—my bear

is very large, and seems to be fat ; and if you say so, we'll go together and see if he is worth eating."

Fletcher and Gage held a short consultation together with their eyes, without speaking, and then shook their heads.

"And why not?" continued the Forester, eyeing them suspiciously. "It is not half a mile from here,"—pointing away off to the left.

"Well, if you must know," said Gage, "we are after other game, and are afraid to lose the track."

"Other game!—what game, if you please?" continued the Forester, with a look of intense eagerness. "At any rate, I've no objection to leaving the bear till we return, and taking my chance with you, if the signs are encouraging. What are they, if you please?"

"Hadn't we better tell him?" whispered Gage. "He won't leave us, you may be sure, if he suspects any thing underhanded."

"With all my heart," said Fletcher; and then stopping suddenly, he called the major, and directed his attention to a line of tracks, nearly covered up with the light snow, and coming out from the nearest wood; then sweeping round a ledge, where they were lost sight of, and then reappearing at a distance in the direction of a low, thick undergrowth. "Now, what say you to that, major?"

"To that—pshaw!—the track of some poor wandering Indian boy."

"Of a *boy*, major?"

The major nodded. "I have crossed it more than once within the last hour," said he, "but have paid little or no attention to it; such things are so common with old hunters."

"Not in this neighborhood, though; so far out of the way of all the Indian tribes we are acquainted with," added Gage.

"Well, to be sure, there may be something in that," said the major. "But what is your object? Are you afraid the poor boy is lost?"—watching the countenance of Gage with a look of suspicion, as he continued—"A native Indian boy lost in the woods of Maine! Pooh! pooh!"

"And you call that the foot of a boy, do you?—of a wandering Indian boy?" repeated Gage, with a low chuckle.

"And what do you call it, pray?"

"The footprint of a girl."

"Of a girl!—pshaw!"

"Well, major, you may pooh! and pshaw! as much as you like; but I have my reasons."

"Your reasons, have you—indeed! Perhaps you would be so obliging as to tell us about how old the girl is?"

"Certainly," said Gage, with a good-natured laugh, stooping down and pointing to the arch made by a springing step—"not over fifteen or sixteen at the most, I should say."

The major's brow darkened. A swarthy glow settled upon his high cheek-bones for a moment, like the light of a blacksmith's forge—a sort of angry flush, as if he didn't half like the captain's boyish trifling.

"But," continued Gage, without appearing to notice the change of countenance which startled Fletcher, "what say you, Fletcher? You are deeper in woodcraft than either of us."

"Doubted!" was the reply; and then glancing at the major, and seeing how much in earnest he was, Fletcher gave a flat denial, declaring, in so many words, that he was no match for the Old Forester in woodcraft, though he would not deny that he was a pretty fair shot on the wing—if not on the leap,—winking at Gage, and then looking mischievously at the major, as if expecting him to own up.

But no—the major's thoughts were evidently on quite another track, and he seemed resolute in withstanding all temptations to step aside.

"Well, Mr. Fletcher," said he, after waiting a reasonable time, "you do not answer. What say you to the captain's question? Is that the footprint of a boy or girl?"

"Of a girl, I should say, beyond all question."

"And why not of a woman?"

"Because your Indian women are always heavily burdened, if not with papposes and other household appendages, almost always with the rattle-traps wanted for hunting or camping out, and sometimes with the provisions; and this, you see, is the light, springy step of an unburdened female."

"But why a female?"

"Oh, nonsense, major! How childish for you and me to be arguing such a question seriously, after all our experience

such matters. I know, and you know, that the track is that of a girl, and of a young girl too, and not of a boy—the very small size, the highly-arched instep, and the embroidered moccasin, which, if you examine the prints carefully, you will find has left a slight impression here and there on the side of the track, both of beads and porcupine quills; and then, too, just observe how short the steps are.”

“Ugh!” exclaimed the Old Forester, with a deep, guttural intonation, so like that of a native Ojibbeway as to startle Gage, who, turning to Fletcher, asked what the plague the short steps had to do with the question.

“Much, my good sir; the women and the large boys are accustomed to travel with their husbands and fathers: and being obliged to keep up with them, get into a habit of lengthening their stride, and overstepping.”

“Ah, yes! I see! I thank you for this sample of your woodcraft,” said Gage.

“Give me your hand, Mr. Fletcher,” said the major; “you were made for the business you seem so fond of. You deserve your reputation. I should think, notwithstanding your light complexion and light hair, that you had Indian blood in you.”

“Well, we have a tradition in our family that my mother was chased by an Indian,” said Fletcher, with a pleasant laugh.

“Ah!—did he overtake her?” inquired the major, without moving a muscle.

A loud, rattling laugh was the only reply.

“Allow me,” continued the major, stepping aside to examine the tracks a little further off, and calling their attention to signs which had escaped their scrutiny. “Before you make up your minds, let me advise you to look further. What d’ye say to that?” stooping and pointing to a small ring in the snow.

Fletcher looked puzzled.

“Girls do not carry rifles, do they?”

“Rifles!” exclaimed Gage; “what do you mean, major?”

“I mean that the person whose footprints we are following, whether girl or boy, witch or devil, carried a rifle.”

“But how do you know this?”

"How do I know it!—why, there's the print of the muzzle in the snow! Examine for yourselves—eight square you see."

Gage looked, and then exclaimed, "True enough!—but would a boy—a sportsman—ever be guilty of such a thing? That print, my good sir, only goes to satisfy me that, although she carried a rifle, she did not know how to use it, and was no sportsman—I beg your pardon—sportswoman."

"Very fair," retorted the major; "but you overlook the reason. The boy—for the present I choose to call it a boy—seems to have suspected that something was on his trail, for many of his tracks are covered up with light snow, and some are turned the other way; but instead of doubling for any distance, when he struck the ledge where the print of the muzzle is found, the tracks disappear suddenly, and altogether—and when you light on them again, they are on the other side of the ledge, and running in a contrary direction toward the dark, tangled underbrush yonder."

Fletcher smiled, and his fine eyes lighted up with uncommon splendor.

"And what do you infer from all that?" asked Gage, more and more bewildered.

"Mount that ledge, and my life on't, you will find a key to the mystery. But remember, you will see no footprints on the ice there. You must look for other signs."

After a few minutes of narrow and close investigation, Gage called out that he had found something. Fletcher followed, and was able to trace, by the faintest possible signs, enough to connect the trail. But the major stood afar off, silent and motionless, darkly smiling, evidently annoyed, and yet, on the whole, somewhat pleased, that his opinion should be so clearly verified.

"Well, major, you are right," said Gage, on returning to the place of consultation; "but I do not see, after all, how these facts go to determine the sex of our young Indian hunter."

"But Mr. Fletcher does; ask him," said the major.

"Not conclusively, captain," said Fletcher; "but inasmuch as you inferred that Little Moccasin must be a girl, because no boy would have plunged the muzzle of his gun into the

snow after the fashion we see, the major wants you to acknowledge that the trick was worthy of an experienced hunter."

"How so? I do not understand."

"Hear me through, and you will. Having reached the ledge, and covered up most of the traces, the hunter uses his rifle for a leaping-pole, and setting the muzzle in the snow, springs upon the rock, where the footprints will be lost on the smooth ice, and then runs along the top for two or three rods, and goes off down the other side, where, without a dog, nobody would ever think of following."

"Capital!" exclaimed Gage; "but my faith is unshaken. The short steps, the springing arch, and the daintily-embroidered moccasins, are conclusive with me."

The Old Forester smiled, and bit his lips. "But why," said he, "*why* continue the chase? What have we to hope, my young friends, though we should follow the trail beyond the Madawaska? Why not go back to the bear I have treed for you?—*dished*, I might say, for there he hangs, half-way out of the hollow tree where I shot him, ready to fall either way; and take what we want to the boys, leaving them to cut him up and peel him at their leisure; and go back to camp, where they will soon be looking for us? What say you?"

"Couldn't think of it!" said Gage. "Our friend here hates mystery, he tells us; but I am free to confess that I love mystery; and I am so carried away—so bewitched, I believe—by the Little Moccasin——by the way, Fletcher, why not call her so?—that I am ready to follow her to the ends of the earth."

"Or into the sea, perhaps," added the major, with a sort of sneer, which the captain was half inclined to resent.

"Yes, anywhere!" said he.

"One word with you, Mr. Fletcher," said the major, stepping a little aside, where they might confer together without being overheard.

Fletcher consented, and the conference lasted till Gage grew nervous and fidgety, and went a step or two nearer—so near, indeed, that without intending to listen, he gathered enough to satisfy him as to the drift of the major's expostulation. He was evidently trying to persuade Fletcher to abandon

the search, as both boyish and unprofitable, if not absolutely dangerous; for it could not be supposed that the child, whether boy or girl, was very far from her friends, and the red-man is deadly in his vengeance where his children are meddled with; and Fletcher was declaring that, for himself, "he had no choice in the matter—it was just as the captain said." On hearing this, a new idea seemed to take instantaneous possession of Gage's mind.

"By all means—let us give it up," said he, greatly to the surprise of the major, who kept his keen eyes upon him, as if determined to find the reason for such a sudden change of purpose; but the frank, open-hearted expression of Gage's blue eyes and pleasant smile seemed to satisfy him, as he came up alongside, and, after listening a few minutes, instead of holding himself aloof, and fighting shy, as before, he proposed to return by the way suggested, and lug off a supply of the bear's meat."

No sooner said than done. Off they started, and soon reached the bear. He was lodged high up in the crotch of an overgrown hemlock, partly hidden by the branches, and though, to all appearance, ready to fall either way with a touch, yet was it found no easy matter for two of our old hunters to dislodge him. The major shook his head when the others declared the creature to be so nicely balanced that if they could only manage to prevent his falling back into the hollow tree, a touch would "settle the hash"—for hadn't the major tried, with all his strength, for a quarter of an hour, to get up the rest of the creature, out of the hole, without being able to move him six inches?

Having secured a large allowance of steak, which needed no hammering with a wooden mallet, and no freezing and thawing to make it palatable for hungry men with good teeth and a ravenous appetite, they started off and reached the camp just in season to find all the boys at home, and so largely supplied with all sorts of game, including moose-meat, grouse, young deer, wild goose—which had been shot by Charley while they were laughing at him for mistaking a loon for a goose—to say nothing of an otter and a musquash, that there seemed to be no likelihood of another hunt being wanted for a month.

And now they all set to work preparing for a "big supper," some broiling the bear-steak and moose-meat on beds of live coals—others roasting it in strips wound about a stick before a scorching blaze—others stripping the feathers by handfuls from the birds, and others making tea, each for himself, in a tin dipper, to be sweetened with molasses—here of dried sage, or balm, and there of the wild cherry or foxberry leaves, or young cedar, and others again dishing up the apple-sauce, and cold baked beans, and honest rye-and-Indian—and all manifesting a readiness and power of adaptation quite astonishing, and a capacity which, reduced to cubic feet and inches, were enough to take away your breath—as it did theirs before they got through.

Hot suppers are somewhat dangerous for the dwellers in ceiled houses; but in the deep of the wilderness, in mid-winter, after a whole day's tramp, for men with the appetite and the teeth of hungry wolves, there is no danger of nightmares or apoplexies, though they should eat live bears—working away at one end, while the other was roasting—or a young devil stuffed with fireworks.

CHAPTER V.

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL.

CAPTAIN BOB GAGE was not a man to be easily turned out of his way, or discouraged. Whatever he undertook he never abandoned till he had accomplished his purpose in some way, or satisfied himself that he had nothing to hope. Like General Grant before Vicksburg, though he might change his plan of operations, he never lost sight of the object he had in view at the beginning. A quiet, cool-headed, fearless man. Little given to talk or bluster, he had that in his clear blue eye and closely-shut mouth, which made others willing to follow him through hardship, trial and suffering sure that he would come out right in the long run.

He was now on the alert, and serious and silent so that

none of the boys were willing to question him, though very curious to know what the next move would be.

A heavy, drenching rain—the heaviest for months—had fallen during the night, and all the giant trees were found sheathed in glittering armor—a panoply of crystal, dazzling and complete, and all the luxuriant undergrowth bending with the pomp of jewelry, or hanging out their sprays and bunches of orient pearls, and all the double spruce, with plumage like that of the prince's feather in three parts, and lacking only the motto *Feh dien* to be armorial—and bronzed hemlocks, and tasseled pines, and plaited cedars were incrustated with frozen fire, set in opaque emeralds, and flashing with inward life; and all the young birches were dancing and trembling for joy, and showering diamonds with every passing breath of wind, upon the dark, smooth ice below—rattling and tinkling, as they fell through the deep shadow, like shattered musical boxes.

Nothing like the splendors now before them had these rough men ever met with in all their large experience; and when they came trooping out of their log-house, with Charley crowing his best, Juba tumbling heels over head, and the dogs in full cry, and stood silent and breathless—and apart—before a cluster of the red mountain ash loaded with berries like bunches of coral, intermixed with brilliants and pearls, some of them uncovered, as with the instinct of worship, and stood a while, gazing up into the clear, cold blue of the unclouded firmament, or away off into the overloaded avenues and arched openings, with an awe they had never felt before. And why should they not? They were in the very heart of God's large cathedral, blazing with gems and fire, and showering sunshine and shattered rainbows about their way. No wonder that some stood silent and speechless, waiting for the spell to be broken with trumpet song, or prayer, or pealing anthem, or a burst of thunder.

Meanwhile the captain had stolen away, and was now wandering off upon some errand of his own, buried in thought, and strangely heedless of all the wonders about him, though every step brought down a rattling shower of brightness across his path, and the small shrubbery shook and trembled at every breath of wind, as if the very roots were disturbed.

He was armed to the teeth, but alone, and evidently on the watch for somebody or something. Hour after hour he held on his way, until, just as the sun was setting, and the great woods were all ablaze with triumphant glory, and all the clearings lighted up with unaccustomed splendor, he reached the point where they had lost the trail of the little moccasin the day before. Determined not to give up, he continued the search, though hardly a trace could be found of the little prints which had been so easily followed up to the foot of the ledge, and along on the other side, owing to the heavy rain, which had changed the whole face of the country; and the sudden thaw, which had leveled the roughest places, and obliterated all their footsteps, leaving only here and there a dimple.

But he persevered nevertheless, and soon recovered the trail, after he entered the undergrowth, and was not a little surprised to find the direction changed, so as to lead into the thick of the wilderness, where the snow lay deeper, and the rains had not so greatly changed the surface, but only formed a strong, smooth, glittering crust. Here it needed the most careful scrutiny, for the footprints were only touches here and there—hurried and faint—along the dazzling surface, and liable to be overlooked even by a more experienced eye. Standing at a distance, there were signs to be made out, running all in one direction, which, as he drew near, seemed to vanish. Separately examined, they were any thing but satisfactory; but when he stood still, and cast his eye along as far as he could see, there was an appearance not to be mistaken, as if something had passed swiftly, either pursued or in pursuit, and within a few hours at furthest.

Once or twice, while hurrying hither and thither, into the woods and out, he saw, or fancied he saw, a long way off, something in motion. It was like a shadow, and appeared to be running along the ground at one time, and then dodging behind the trees. Might he not be followed?—and if so, by what?—or whom? Looking to the cap on his rifle, and remembering his narrow escape from the cougar, he was just making up his mind to follow it, when it suddenly disappeared altogether, and left him to follow the Little Moccasin trail once more, under greater and still greater disadvantages; for

the fading light no longer enabled him to trace the distant line as before, and was no help to him, if he stopped to examine a sign by itself.

What was to be done? It grew darker—so dark that he began to feel unsafe and a little nervous; and so, at last, he determined to look about for some hollow tree, or some quiet hole in the rocks, where he could not be taken by surprise, and there rest awhile, and take a bite of the pork and beans he had brought with him, and wait for the moon to rise.

He soon found just what he wanted—an opening in the ledge, completely protected on both sides and arched overhead, so that he could only be approached in front; and there he threw himself down, with his rifle over his knees, and helped himself, and waited, until he felt as if he were strong enough to follow that trail to the ends of the earth, if he could only light on it once more. But how would it be possible, now that all traces were lost, and not likely to be recovered till the morrow?

At the end of another hour, up rolled the moon through a sky that seemed all alive with coruscations and flashes, while the earth below flung back the yellowish light, and the glittering crust, and the dancing sprays, and the cloudy branches of hemlocks and cedars and pines, answered flash with flash; and the deep shadows were projected athwart the openings, so that the slightest motion might be seen at a prodigious distance.

But moonlight was hardly more favorable than twilight for Gage; and while he was casting about with himself, undetermined what to do, and neither willing to pursue the search all night nor to lie by without proper covering, lest he should fall asleep, he caught a glimpse of somebody moving through the distant wood, just where it opened upon a new clearing. It was evidently a man, however, and not a boy, nor any wild creature of the aboriginal solitude. Snatching up his gun, he started off in pursuit of the shape, careful not to show himself near the edge of the wood, nor in the clearing, and determined, if possible, to head it off. Obligated to be exceedingly cautious, and to lose no little time in maneuvering, he found it no easy matter, for the first hour, to keep the stranger

in view, for he, also, judging by his cautious and stealthy movements, was on the trail of something.

Ali at once, however, and while he was yet a long way off, and running from tree to tree, whenever he could get a chance within the shadow, while the other seemed to be looking a different way, something in his attitude startled Gage so that a slight exclamation escaped him. He stole nearer—yet nearer—and became satisfied that he was on the track of the Old Forester himself. Astonished and vexed, and somewhat puzzled, he determined to be still more wary. At any rate, as it was no longer possible to see the traces of the Indian girl by the changeable, uncertain light of the moon, he resolved to keep the major in sight. “And *if*—gracious heaven! *if*,”—said he to himself, wondering he had never thought of it before—“*if* he is on the same errand, I have only to follow his lead without being suspected, so crafty and so sure is he, to find out either all I wish to know without puzzling myself about the lost trail, or at least, what the plague he is after.”

It grew colder and colder—so cold that poor Gage was afraid to stop, or even to think of resting, though the weather seemed to have no effect upon the major, if one might judge by the swiftness and elasticity of his movements. Two or three times, while they were within a long rifle range, the Old Forester stopped, and seemed to be listening; but never once did he stoop or look down, as if searching for signs; and hour after hour, held on his way, as if with a certain definite purpose over a perfectly familiar path.

“Very strange, and rather mysterious,” thought Gage; “but cunning as he is, he shall find me a match for him, if I have the least reason to suspect him of listening or eavesdropping.”

At length, he reached a desolate region, all heaped with loosened rocks and blasted hemlocks, and burnt stumps, and driftwood, and other unsightly rubbish. It seemed as if they had been overswept by fire and flood—“wrecks of a single winter,”—and the rocks and trees were piled up here and there as you may see them to this day in the bed of the torrent, which swept away the Willie family among the White Hills of New Hampshire.

There the major stopped, and after looking about for a few moments, as if to satisfy himself that he was not followed, nor

observed, he plunged into a deep ravine, the mouth of which seemed partially concealed by shrubbery.

More and more astonished, the captain quickened his steps, and soon caught sight of the strange man, a little way off standing on a heap of rocks and rubbish, and looking about as if to verify the landmarks before he ventured further.

A long, low whistle next engaged the attention of Gage, and then there was another, and the Old Forester changed his position, and stood as if listening. But no answer came. The signal was repeated, but louder and longer; and then followed the answer—and lo! up out of the sneltering depths of the ravine, and over all the wreck and rubbish, left by flood and fire, and earthquake and storm—*up*, as if conjured into life by that mysterious whistle, sprung a young Indian girl—a child in appearance, though tall and slender—with a rifle in her hand, a fur cap and a fur mantle, and her long hair flying loose. With a joyful cry—the cry of a happy child—she rushed into the arms of the Old Forester, and hid her face in his bosom, while he caught both her hands in his, and held them to his heart, and set his lips to her forehead, with a passionate fervor which provoked Gage beyond all endurance.

Another moment and they had vanished—both of them—as if the earth had opened and swallowed them—vanished like shadows.

The captain was at first inclined to follow; but being out of temper with himself, and with everybody else, he took a little further time for consideration, and at last contented himself with creeping as near as he could to the spot where he had seen them last, without the risk of being discovered and set upon—or waylaid on his return. But there were no signs, no sounds—nothing but the low, solemn whispering of the pines, and the rattling icicles in the rising wind, with now and then the fall of some huge tree in the depths of the forest gloom, or the breaking of an overloaded branch, the size of your body, perhaps.

Far from being satisfied, and more and more determined to get at the bottom of the mystery, but in some other way, Gage turned, not to retrace his steps, for that would have ~~taken him~~ long miles out of his true course, but to get back

to camp in the shortest possible way, and with the least possible waste of time and strength.

It was well on toward daybreak when he reached the end of his journey, and he was almost ready to drop with weariness, disappointment and vexation, as he stole into the lodge without disturbing the boys, and flung himself down upon the first vacant spot he could find on the floor, and was soon so soundly asleep, that even the crowing of Charley, at the first signs of daybreak, followed by the yelping of the dogs and the deep thunder-growl of Tiger, did not disturb him.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PLOT THICKENS.

THE next day being just what Gage and his whole crew had been waiting for, to break a new path leading to a prodigious accumulation of logs, all cut of the proper length, and lopped and trimmed, and partly stripped of their bark, to guard against the worms, the men were all turned loose into the woods, with Juba and Charley leading off and whooping like mad. Their teams were in capital order, which, down-east, means that the cattle were in a condition to take off any thing they were hitched to. By the new path, now to be opened, half a day's teaming might be saved, and some of the largest and handsomest timber ever cut in the woods of Maine secured for the spring freshet.

Having made all his arrangements, and given particular directions about lodging the logs where there would be no hindrance when the tumultuous waters they depended upon should come rushing and tumbling through the hollows and ravines, Gage took the earliest opportunity for stealing off with Fletcher, where they might have a talk together, upon a business now getting to be more important for Gage than even his lumbering operations.

Having wandered a long way off, without being observed, Gage seated himself on a huge burnt log for awhile, and then,

to be less conspicuous, upon a charred stump in a desolate region over which a hurricane of fire had swept only the season before, and Fletcher having taken possession of another, just facing him, where they could sweep the whole district for a long way, and nothing could approach without being seen by one or the other, a consultation was held.

"Well—I am not very inquisitive, captain," said Fletcher; "but, inasmuch as you have brought me here, and seem so careful to be where you can not be taken by surprise, nor troubled with listeners or eavesdroppers, I take it for granted you have something to communicate well worth hearing."

"I have, indeed," said Gage, first throwing a hurried glance in every direction, and then slipping down behind the stump, signing to Fletcher to follow his example, and seating himself on a large, blackened root, where he was carefully hidden from observation, though a stranger were to pass within ear-shot.

Fletcher smiled at such excessive caution, but followed his example, nevertheless.

After gathering their blankets about them, and adjusting their rifles over their knees, Gage began with telling him what had happened the day before, and why he had gone off as they all thought on a wild-goose chase.

Fletcher's eyes kindled, as Gage described the young Indian girl; and he sat rubbing his hands and chuckling to himself and nodding significantly, as if delighted beyond expression that their conjectures had been so pleasantly verified notwithstanding the adroit management of the Old Forester, in trying to mislead them.

"But," said he, at last, "but, I say, though, Captain Gage, between ourselves, what conclusion have you reached? What think you of the little maiden?"

"I hardly know what to think; and it is for that reason I have led you here, where we can talk freely together, without danger of interruption."

"Well, then, first and foremost, if you please, captain, are you satisfied that the tracks we saw and followed so long were the tracks of that girl?"

"Satisfied!—no, I can not say I am *satisfied*; and yet, how unlikely that there should be two young Indian girls

astray in this part of our great northern wilderness—and both armed with rifles—and both coming and going at will, by night and by day—and both vanishing so suddenly. No, no—it must be the Little Moccasin; and to make all sure, I mean to measure the footprints, and look for the signs we followed along that ledge, and up into the woods, so far and so faithfully. What say you?”

“Well, agreed; but another question occurs to me just now. Have you made up your mind about the relationship that exists between that crafty old major and the ‘Little Moccasin?’”

“Can’t say I have. Sometimes, when I call to mind the gentleness and tenderness he manifested, and her affectionate warmth when he drew her up to his heart, and held both of her hands in his, I can not help thinking she may be his child.”

“*His* child!—”

“Too young for a wife—she is too young, shouldn’t you say so Fletcher?” continued Gage, with a troubled look, and a slight quiver in his voice. “Altogether too young for a mistress.”

“For a mistress, man!”

“For a sweetheart, I should say; a young creature in whom he has taken a deep interest, which, between ourselves, Fletcher, I should like to get to the bottom of. The more I think of it, the more I am puzzled. Why these footprints should be found for miles and miles at such a distance from our camp, when all the time the major must have known where they led to, beats me altogether.”

“And me too,” said Fletcher, looking bewildered and relapsing into profound thought. “Still, I think if you persevere in a quiet way, without rousing the suspicions of our mysterious friend, you will soon be able to satisfy yourself as to the nature of their relationship—if you are in earnest.”

“If I am in earnest!—Gracious God! when I can not sleep o’ nights for thinking of that child.”

Fletcher stared as if he thought he must have misunderstood him.

“Was she so very beautiful then?” he asked.

“Yes, indeed—to tell you the truth, I did not get near enough to see her face; but I am sure she must be beautiful,

judging by her footprints, and the wonderful grace of her lithe movements. Oh, you needn't laugh!—I am perfectly serious. Nature seldom contradicts herself, and in short, I *must* have your help, Fletcher."

"With all my heart, captain; but how, and where, and in what way, please?"

"Well, in the first place, it will never do for me to be very busy in the search. I saw that in the old man's eye yesterday when we gave up the trail at his suggestion, and came back to camp, which satisfied me that if he had no deadly purpose in his heart, he was wide awake to my purpose, and determined to baffle me; and I think he may, if we don't manage to work out a new traverse."

"Agreed—but how?—what are your plans?"

"Well, my notion is that, if you can slip off on a hunt, without any parade or preparation, while I hang about the camp, and the logging teams, where he can see me all the time, and hear my voice, he will not be likely to give himself any trouble about you; all his suspicions being directed toward me."

"And what then?"

"Well, then, after you are safe, and there is no longer any chance of your being followed—and if there should, I will be on his track and give you a signal with two shots from my double barrel—I want you to make your way to the ravine, and there find out all you can about the mystery."

"But how am I to find that ravine?"

"You remember where the fire raged for two or three weeks last year, sweeping over the ridge, and laying hundreds of acres waste?"

"Yes—we are now on the outskirts."

"Well, if you keep on the outer edge, after you come to the place where we gave up the search, and steer due north, till you come to three charred hemlocks, and then pass through a large growth of pines for about a mile and a half, till you come to a brook, and then follow that brook for two or three miles further, it will bring you to the mouth of the ravine, and there, just where the splintered logs, the huge rocks and the driftwood are piled up in the the greatest confusion, you will see a cluster of young birches that have escaped the fire, and

are standing quite by themselves—and yet further off a gigantic, thunder-blasted pine, the tallest in all that neighborhood. Steering straight for that, you come in sight of the ravine, and if you manage as I know you will, the very spot on which the mystery took place—a great pile of rocks and rubbish—you may get near enough to, for your purpose; after which, you will be governed by circumstances—only be upon your guard there may be others watching you—or, at any rate, others whom you would not like to meet with alone and unprepared.”

“It is hardly to be supposed that such a young creature would be alone—‘all, all alone’—in such a desolate solitude as you have described.”

“Just my idea!” said Gage, offering the other his hand, with a cordial grip. “Success to you—good-by, I’m off to join the loggers.”

On reaching the spot they were clearing of logs, the catt’o at full spring, and Charley and Juba shouting whoop! whoop! hurrah! and the dogs tumbling about in the snow, he found the Old Forester sitting apart from the others, with his head resting upon his hands, mute and motionless, and lost in a deep reverie.

Gage went up to him, and laying his hand upon his shoulder, asked what was the trouble.

The strange man looked up with a mournful expression, which went to the heart of Gage, whose chin quivered in sympathy; but he did not immediately answer. That something weighed heavily on his mind, it was easy to see, but who could guess at the nature of such sorrow?—a mixture of loneliness and a sort of sullen discontent could be perceived now and then, however, as Gage stood waiting for the answer, settling about his mouth and throwing a shadow over his large forehead and swarthy temples.

At last he spoke in a low, muffled voice, which sounded as from afar, like the wind among the pines by the sea-shore. “I must leave you,” said he—“my time is up; and the rest of my work must be done elsewhere.”

“But, my good friend, why leave us? And what are we to do without your help? There are large districts in this very neighborhood, which have been wholly overlooked by our lumbermen—perhaps on account of the fire. With this

region you are better acquainted than any other man alive, and really, I do not see how we can hope to get along without you. If wages are in the way—you shall be satisfied."

The Forester shook his head, and smiled.

"You have only to name your terms, and I tell you beforehand, that where it depends upon me, and I have the entire control of this department, I will agree to any thing, rather than part with you, before we have finished our explorations."

After another long pause, the major grasped the hand of Gage, and said, in a voice almost choking with emotion—"Gage—Captain Gage—I like you, and I have liked you from the first. You are a man after my own heart, and I have such faith in your honesty of purpose, that I should like to stand by you here—and everywhere—but"—and here he stopped suddenly.

"But what? Speak plainly, my friend—if you prefer a partnership to wages, you have only to say so."

"Not a word, if you please, about wages—I am perfectly satisfied—and I desire no partnership."

"Well then, what is it? Why stop so suddenly with that confounded *but*? Are you dissatisfied with your associates?"

"No, indeed! far from it. They are just the kind of men, without a single exception, that I should like to go through fire and water with."

"I didn't know but you might have taken a dislike to Perry—if so, you have only to say the word, and off he goes, within the next hour."

"Not for the world, Captain Gage! Perry is a true man. Our little misunderstanding was natural enough, under the circumstances; but the more I see of that man, the better I like him."

"Well, then, what is it? I pray you tell me—make a clean breast of it; and if you say so, it shall be strictly confidential, no matter whom it concerns."

"You mistake me, altogether, my good friend—all I intended to say, by that *but*, which seems to have so disturbed you, was, that notwithstanding my sincere and hearty liking for yourself and for the fine fellows with you, I have a duty to perform—a matter of life and death—which must be attended to, and which can not be longer delayed."

Gage felt a burning desire to find out the reason, the true reason, and had his suspicions ; but, knowing with whom he had to deal, forbore all questioning, though he still continued his expostulations, trying to persuade the mysterious man to stay with them, at least for a few weeks longer ; or if not weeks, days, till at last he found that he was waking suspicions in the mind of the major, and that, with such a solemn and settled purpose it were idle for him to contend further.

“ Well, if you must go,” said he, at last, as the major rose up after their long conference, and drew the leathern belt tighter about his waist, as if preparing for serious work—“ tell me if there is any thing we can do for you ?”

“ Nothing—no human help can be of use to me. I have an errand on my conscience, which I have too long neglected. Unwilling to do it—afraid even to think of it—I have been loitering here in this pleasant company, in the vain hope that, if I could only manage to sleep o’ nights and keep employed in the daytime, the burden might fall away of itself, or be lightened. But no—it has only grown the heavier for my resting on the way ; and now I must on, like the prophet of old, though an angel of the Lord were standing in my path.”

More and more astonished at the bearing and language of the man, so much above all he had expected of him, and greatly disturbed by his looks, which were almost threatening at times, so that he was more than once reminded of the controversy with Perry, Gage desisted from all further questioning, and offered him his hand.

The major grasped it between both of his, and for a moment or two, seemed to be choking.

“ Captain Gage,” said he at last, in a husky voice, “ you must bid good-by to the men for me—and especially to Perry. Give what explanation you please of my sudden departure, but above all, assure them, if we should never meet again, that I shall never forget their kindness. They are manly fellows ; and there is not one of the whole, whom I do not look upon as a brother, or at least, as an old school-fellow. And now, good-by !—farewell, my friend—allow me to call you so—don’t forget me, and if nothing happens, you may hear of me again before the winter is through—”

"I hope so, with all my heart!" said Gage, interrupting him with such suddenness and with such an expression of sincere pleasure, that the major seemed greatly moved.

"Before the winter is through," repeated the major. "I have something on my mind—something in my head—which, hereafter, if you are the man I believe you to be, will certainly bring us together once more; and now, once more, farewell! and may God Almighty bless and keep you!"

"And you too, mysterious man!" said Gage, as the other moved away without looking behind him, straight toward the deep of the wilderness, and steering due north.

"Just what I feared," said Gage to himself, relapsing into a brown study as he watched the course of the major, "and I would follow him, if I durst; but no—why should I?—the man is altogether a man, and what business have I with his concerns? Upon my word, I am half sorry, and almost ashamed of myself, that I have allowed my inquisitiveness to lead me so far; but then—after all—how should I know that he had any thing to do with the little moccasin tracks, when we first followed them?"

After reasoning with himself a while longer, until he had begun to wish, almost, that he had not sent Fletcher on that errand, or to hope that he might miss the way—almost, not quite—he went among the men, and told them that the major had been called away, suddenly, on business.

"The land!" exclaimed Will Bagley.

"Sakes alive!" muttered Joe Sibley.

"Je—rusalem!" said Charley.

"Wal! if ever!" growled Hannaford—"and what on 'arth are we gwyin' to do without him, I should be glad to know, arter we are through with these diggin's?"

"Gone—really gone!" added Perry, in a sorrowful tone, which surprised everybody. "And gone, too, without so much as a good-by! or a God bless you! or even a shake of the hand."

"He begged me to do it for him," said Gage.

"Well, then, here goes!" said Charley, jumping off a log, and running up to the captain with both hands out. "Tip us your daddle, ray boy—whoop!—hurrah!—cock-a-doodle-do!"

The others followed—laughing boisterously enough to be

heard a mile through the cold, frosty air—even Juba and the dogs appearing to be sensible of their loss.

“A brave, honest fellow,” added Perry; “but where is Fletcher? What on earth has become of him? I do wish he was here.”

“Gone after moose, or a *little deer*,” said Charley.

Gage started; and beckoning Charley aside, beyond ear-shot of the others, asked him sternly what he meant.

“Oh, nonsense, cap’n—don’t you get ryled—don’t I know what you’ve both been arter for the last three days, ever sence we first heerd about the little moccasin tracks? Ah-ha!—can’t fool this chile, as Juba says; them fellers think me underwitted—but—I guess I know a thing or two.”

The captain felt relieved. For a moment, he was afraid Charley had been playing the eavesdropper; but when he called to mind the precaution they had taken while out in the burnt district—sitting on the snow, behind the charred stump, where they could sweep the whole country for miles, he gave up the idea, and patting Charley on the shoulder, and telling him to lie low and keep dark—in reply to which the youth gave him two or three winks with both eyes—he returned to the logging swamp, feeling easier and safer, if not happier for the explanation.

CHAPTER VII.

UNEXPECTED RETRIBUTION.

It was, indeed, a weary tramp for poor Fletcher. Having no special interest in the question, except so far as Gage was concerned, he held on his way with a dogged resolution, worthy of the highest praise, till he reached the point where they had both been turned back two days before; meanwhile, it began to snow, and long before he reached the spot where he was to turn off, the narrow pathway was entirely hidden, and not a footprint was to be found.

Still he persevered, and after stopping a while to take his bearings, and to study the moss on the trees, and observe

which way they leaned, that he might be sure of a due north course, he set off again with a braver step and a sturdier resolution, resolved to justify the confidence of Gage, though half blinded by the driving snow-dust, which came down upon him in whirls and eddies, with long intervals of stillness, that would have been appalling to the inexperienced.

On—on—ceaselessly on! and yet, there were times when Fletcher seemed to be making no headway, when all the landmarks he depended upon were lost, and when he felt, as he plowed heavily along, and plunged through the fast-gathering drifts, to a dull, melancholy, muffled roar, coming and going like the sounds we hear at dead of night from the distant seashore, very much as if he was going to his own funeral. And why not? Others had been lost in the woods—others had been buried in the great northern snow-drifts, only to be thawed out in the spring; and why, notwithstanding all his hardihood, courage and experience, why might not he be misled by the changed appearances about his way, and wander off, and be lost? He was not a man to be easily frightened, but he had never seen any thing like this—and it seemed to grow worse and worse every mile. He was almost ready to drop with weariness and vexation; but to stop was death, unless he could find shelter somewhere—some hollow tree, or some cleft in the ledges; but beclouded as he was, and almost bewildered by the strangeness of the landscape, he was afraid to turn to the right or left, and only did so now and then to examine the trees and assure himself that he had not wandered from the true course. Though it was only the middle of the afternoon by his watch, the snow had so darkened and filled the air that, oftentimes, he could not see a dozen yards before him; and the large, solitary trees, which had been spared along the outskirts of the wilderness, by the woodman or the fire, loomed up like giant phantasmagoria through the solemn, bewildering twilight.

Still he persevered—turning neither to the right nor left, until he found himself, all at once, and most unexpectedly, upon the side of a deep gorge, running through the burnt district and corresponding with the description of the ravine. It was incumbered with huge masses of rock and upturned charred stumps, and large trees ground up and splintered, and heaps

of driftwood—but, somehow, it did not seem to be running in the right direction.

While wandering up and down the verge to satisfy himself, his attention was suddenly attracted by a huge, towering shadow in the sky—a great aboriginal phantom—stretching away off into the gathering dimness—a floating mystery, coming and going with the whirls of snow. What could it be?

He went nearer—and yet nearer—wondering more and more as it seemed to drift away from him, till he was just ready to give up, and wait for the explanation of daylight, and a clear sky, when it suddenly took the form of that huge, thunder-blasted tree he was in search of, and then, after a short, swift, laborious tramp, in the direction he had been told to take, the great cloud vanished—the clump of young birches appeared, and the worst of his journey was over.

Altogether astonished that he should have come upon them, so much sooner than he expected, and with so little trouble, he stood with folded arms, and head lifted in thankfulness and trust, feeling as if he had been led by the hand, along that perilous way, and acknowledging to himself, for the first time, that he had been in great danger, and that, notwithstanding all his experience, he might have perished in the snow, as others had, or been lost in the woods forever, like a friend of his, and a capital hunter, only two or three years before.

While musing over such considerations, and almost ready to fall upon his knees where he stood, so abrupt and overpowering was the sudden sense of danger he had escaped, he saw—or thought he saw—something in motion a long way off. It was only a shadow, and was gone before he could trace the outlines—again it appeared, moving toward him through the mist—and then there was a wild cry, like nothing human, followed by a dismal shriek far down the gorge—and the next moment, there stood before him, and almost within striking distance, a magnificent figure, in the garb of an Indian chief, with war eagle-feathers towering above his head, a richly decorated robe, and a large, glittering knife in his hand.

“Go way! go way! white man!” he cried, in a voice

never to be mistaken by one who has once heard the threatening undertones of a real Indian exasperated to madness.

Fletcher grasped his rifle, and waited for the onset, fully determined to drop him, if he took another step in the same direction; but the princely savage only snorted with defiance and scorn, as he saw the rifle dropped quietly into the hollow of Fletcher's left arm, with his right hand covering the trigger-guard, and his middle finger in position. At the first glance, Fletcher saw that he had to do with an Iroquois—and probably a Mohawk, the deadliest of all our ancient foes, before they went over to the Five Nations, and helped to make the present Six Nations—or Iroquois.

"White man go way; no business here—what him want, hey?" growled the Indian, through his clenched teeth, nervously fingering the handle of his knife, and looking as if almost ready to spring at Fletcher's throat.

"My good fellow," said Fletcher, measuring his antagonist with his keen eyes from head to foot, and keeping the rifle in position, so that the Indian saw it would be death to come a step nearer, "my good fellow, what need of quarreling? We hunters go where we please, you know."

"Ugh—ugh!"

"And our business you understand, as well as I do."

The Indian threw up his head with a scornful laugh, which so provoked Fletcher that he said:

"Dog! be off with you, if you don't want a bullet through your head!—stop my way, if you dare!" advancing upon the fellow as he spoke.

The Indian saw that he had met with a dangerous man, that he was in earnest, and that he had "shoot in his eye," and slowly withdrew, step by step, like a tiger at bay, till his figure faded slowly into a dim, fluctuating shadow, and then wholly disappeared.

Fletcher began to breathe more freely. Determined not to be caught napping, however, he stood still, with no bushes on his right or left, nor in his rear, to cover the enemy's approach, if he should try to steal upon him, as it grew darker. The half-shut, smoldering eyes of the savage, ready to flame up at a single word, were enough to satisfy him that his errand was growing dangerous.

Another shriek!—and yet another!—and then, as Fletcher sprang forward in the direction of the sound, without regard to his own safety, they died away in the stormy distance, with a wail that chilled his very blood. But what was he to do? It was no longer possible for him to follow it further—and the ravine itself was getting so clogged with snow, that he was in danger of losing all the way-marks.

If he returned to camp, all traces would be lost, not only of the Little Moccasin, but of his own footsteps, and he might wander—God only knows where—through the storm and darkness.

While debating with himself, he had settled the question in a measure, by turning his face homeward, and asking himself what the girl was to him?—and why he, or Gage, or anybody else about there, should trouble himself to hunt her up? Then he heard the report of a rifle a long way off down the gorge, and in the direction the Iroquois chief had taken. Then there was a wild whoop!—and all was still—still as the grave itself.

There was no longer any hesitation with Fletcher. A terrible tragedy had been represented almost before his eyes, and how would he answer it to Gage—how to his own conscience—if he should turn and flee?

Filled with secret awe, which the circumstances might well account for, he began to believe in the leading of a new Providence; and felt, as he lifted his eyes to the darkening heavens, that he had no choice left. Come what would—he was resolved to know the worst.

Gathering himself up with a newer and higher impulse than he had started with, and dashing ahead with all his might, he soon reached the ravine, and after a rapid survey of the neighborhood, got his bearings afresh, in spite of the snow, found the lodge—a trapper's cabin—where he had no doubt, from all he saw, and all he had been told by Gage, that the Indian girl and the Forester had found a refuge, when both disappeared so suddenly. It was built under the projecting roots of two or three large hemlocks, which overhung the edge of the ravine, and at another season of the year, when the foliage was out and the wild vines in full feather, might have been overlooked ever by the experienced eye of a hunter.

On entering, he found the remains of a pitch-knot and brush-fire smoldering on the rude hearth; and in looking about—nothing but a blanket and a spruce bed—a broken bench—and a pile of dry cedar branches and juniper, to show that he had not found his way into the den of a wild beast.

Having piled on a quantity of the dry brush-wood, and seated himself upon the broken bench, with his eye upon the door—the only opening—he began to reason with himself anew about the strange business he had entered upon.

Could it be possible that the creature Gage had seen hugged to the heart of the Old Forester, was the same little child whose footprints they had been following like sleuth-hounds? and if so—could this dreary, desolate place be her habitation? Would she abide in such a lair alone—"all, all alone"?—and yet there were no signs of companionship; not even the traces of a dog to be found in the lodge, nor about the door.

Peradventure, she had been gone so long that all traces would be covered up by the snow; and yet, there was the fire—a fire of brush-wood, which kindles and flashes like powder, and could not possibly last long, to show that whoever built that fire, could not be very far away.

And then he thought of the Iroquois chief—and the screams—and the rifle-shot, and the war-whoop—till his blood thrilled with a mysterious terror; and then a shadow—the shadow of a man—shot over the snow just outside the door.

Springing to his feet, he waited for the intruder, with his hand upon the lock of his rifle, ready for instant service.

"Halloo!—who goes there!" he shouted.

"A friend!" answered a voice, that he knew to be Gage's. "God be praised!" cried he, "that I have found you at last!"

"At last!—what do you mean?"

"Well—you must know that I followed after you in less than half an hour."

"And why? Had we any thing to fear from the major?"

"Not so far as I know—but I came after you because Charley found your pocket-compass in the closet, and after it began to snow so furiously, I saw at once that if you had not something to guide you, the chances were that you would turn up anywhere at last, but in the neighborhood of the

lodge. And by the way, you must thank poor Charley for this—but for him, we never should have known that you hadn't taken the compass"—and here he stopped, and they shook hands like two brothers, who had been long separated.

"Charley is no fool," said Gage—wiping his eyes—and then kicking the fire into shape.

"No indeed—far from it—though they do call him underwitted and slack-baked—yet I would rather trust him under any great emergency, than any of the crew, except Perry—and perhaps, Hannaford."

"So would I—but the boy has been so long laughed at, for his monkey tricks, that he seems to think his character must be played out—I say though, old fellow," fetching his companion a slap on the back, almost heavy enough to dislodge him, "how on earth did you find your way here?"

"God knows—I don't."

Gage looked rather astonished.

"By this, I mean that I really do not know, for my landmarks were all changed by the snow, and it was quite impossible to find my way along the edge of the burnt district by feeling the moss; and the branches of the trees I found so little to be depended on, that I soon gave up the idea—and resolved to run for luck."

"And well you did, for the most astonishing luck you have had; for my part, I am absolutely frightened, when I think of the danger you ran."

"And so am I—and I hope I shall remember it to my dying day. It makes me catch my breath when I think of it, now."

"After all, though—I should like to hear how you managed to strike the very spot, and get housed so comfortably before night came on; but first, if you please, tell me why you came away without a compass?"

"To tell you the truth, I didn't think of it; and the weather was so clear and beautiful, it never occurred to me, till I found myself bewildered, and well-nigh lost in the whirling snow."

Gage grasped his hand with a slight shudder, and begged him to go on with the story.

Fletcher assented, but long before he had finished, Gage

started to his feet, and after looking at his watch by the shifting firelight, asked him if he had the strength, and the disposition, to follow up the inquiry.

Without a word of reply, Fletcher stood up, and recasting his blanket, and tightening his belt, and grasping his rifle, moved toward the door, followed by Gage with his hands clenched and teeth set, as if prepared for a deadly conflict with whatever might stand in his way.

It was growing lighter—the snow-storm was over—the wind was dying away, and the moon was coming up and scattering the clouds right and left.

For several minutes, neither of them spoke—but they breathed fiercely, and nothing was to be heard along their way but the noise they made in plowing, or wallowing rather, through the light snow, and the beating of their own hearts.

“This way,” said Fletcher, in a low voice; “the screams were in this direction.”

“And the rifle-shot—and the war-whoop?” whispered Gage.

“Rather more to the left.”

“And how far away, should you judge?”

“Half a mile, perhaps.”

“Half a mile!”

“Yes—for the wind was setting this way, and in the stillness that followed every gust, one might hear such a cry even further than that.”

Stronger and stronger grew the light—darker and darker the shadows—till they both stopped and began looking about them, unable to distinguish the trees and charred stumps from their black shadows along the lighted snow. Two or three times, they saw afar off what seemed to be something in motion—but as soon as they moved toward it, it was gone, and after a few minutes it would reappear in another direction.

“Rather strange,” whispered Gage.

“And somewhat threatening,” added Fletcher, grasping his rifle more firmly, and fastening his eyes on the last place where the movement had been seen; “look to your piece, my friend—I don’t half like these flying shadows.”

“It must be the wind, I think.”

“So I should say, if the wind could throw a shadow—or

If it were strong enough to move these giant trees yonder—and there is no foliage worth mentioning so near the borders of the burnt district.”

After another half-hour's tramp, Gage stopped again, and leaning on his rifle, with the breech resting on a stump, greatly to the annoyance of Fletcher, who was never gully of such unsportsmanlike habits, and looking up into the glorious blue sky, now covered with large white clouds all drifting away off to the north, like an army with banners, hurrying to a distant battle-field—and then all about him as far as the eye could reach, he turned to Fletcher, and asked, “Where are we?”

“Let us go back to the lodge,” said Fletcher. “We are only losing time—I have thought so, for the last hour, but have been afraid to say so, lest you might think I was done up, or unwilling to stand by you to the last.”

“You are right, my friend. Back it is, then; and to-morrow we will be up, if you say so, bright and early, and see what we can make of the dread mystery.”

And back they went to the trapper's lodge—hardly a word being spoken on their way.

“Surely,” said Gage, in a whisper, as they entered the door, clutching at the arm of his companion—“*surely* somebody must have been here”—casting his eyes round the lodge with a feeling of uneasiness he would have been slow to acknowledge even to himself. “We never could have left that heap of dry brush so near that bed of coals and white ashes—a breath of wind or a spark might have set the lodge afire.”

Fletcher thought so too—for these were coals of juniper; but on looking round for confirmation, he could see nothing—no traces—no change, absolutely nothing to justify the belief that the lodge had been visited while they were away. The pile of spruce branches, the cedar bed—the broken bench were all undisturbed—even the dirty blanket hung over the end of a log just as they had left it.

All at once, however, it occurred to Gage to go to the door and “look at the weather;” as he did so, an exclamation escaped him, and calling to Fletcher, he pointed to the tracks of a dog and of snow-shoes, the largest he had ever seen.

"Well, my friend, what d'ye say to that?" muttered Gage.

"What do I say! I say that we must keep watch and ward, if we hope to see the light of another day. I don't half like the size of that snow-shoe—it corresponds too nearly with what I should have expected from that confounded Mohawk."

"Mohawk!—do you believe he was really a Mohawk?"

"As much as I believe you are standing there. I know them well—they have never lost their haughty bearing, nor that look of deadly determination which always characterized them, while they were the scourge and terror of our fathers."

"Forewarned, forearmed," said Gage. "Just throw yourself down upon that pile of spruce, and I will stand sentry."

"Not I!—but if you will take a snooze and allow me to sit by the fire, I'll promise you not to fall asleep; and with the door shut and no openings but where the smoke goes through the roof up there, I think I may answer for your safety, if there were half a dozen Mohawks after our scalps."

"Can't do it, my friend; but I'll tell you what I will do. I'll sit down and hear the rest of your story, for you broke off just where my blood began to ripple to my finger-ends, like fire."

"Agreed!" and Fletcher went on and finished the narrative, with all the incidents and particulars.

"But, tell me, captain," said he, after he had finished, "tell me if you are really in earnest about that girl?"

"In earnest! So much in earnest, that I wonder at myself."

"You are infatuated!"

"Of course I am—good-night—call me in two hours and take my place, will you?"

"Ay, ay! Good-night!"

CHAPTER VIII.

AND NOW, WHAT NEXT?

In the night, while our two hunters were keeping watch by turns, and talking over the business in hand, there came another of those terrible storms of sleet and rain, without notice, which are so frequent along our north eastern frontier, and which always make a part of the "January thaw"—just as, sooner or later, we always have the equinoctial storm, you know.

Notwithstanding the impatience of Gage, and by this time, of Fletcher, who began to take a deeper interest in the dreadful drama, they found it impossible to continue their search, before a change of wind from the north should form a crust; otherwise they would not be able to make their way through the deep *slosh* beyond a mile an hour at the most, and with the greatest possible exertion. Snow-shoes, if they had them, would be of no use; but they had left them behind in camp, and it was too late to go back for them.

Hour after hour they fretted and fumed—Gage pacing the trodden floor to and fro, like a wild beast in a menagerie, and Fletcher trying to sleep, while the rain came pouring down upon the roof like a water-spout, from the overhanging roots of the huge hemlocks, under which they were nestled; occasionally going to the door to look out—or getting a glimpse of the sky through a hole which had been left for the smoke, and then settling down again, with a growl, upon his bed of spruce-branches.

At last the wind changed; and changed, too, as suddenly as the rain-storm had burst upon them, reminding Gage, he said, of that awful night which his father used to tell of, when Washington was wholly in the power of his enemy while retreating through the Jerseys, not being able to move his guns or even to march his troops, on account of the deep mud; when all at once, the wind shifted and the great high road became as hard as a pavement, and within a few hours, he and his whole army were safe.

Before three, in the afternoon, the surface of the snow was coated with a crust strong enough to bear a loaded ox-team ; the cold was enough to freeze woodchucks—unbearable indeed, but for the hardihood of our two hunters, their long experience, and their determination to go to the bottom of the mystery they had undertaken to see through.

Fletcher led the way, steering in the direction of the rifle-shot and the war-whoop which followed like an echo. It was a long while before any thing satisfactory turned up—could he be mistaken about the distance, or the direction ? While they stood together debating, Fletcher started off suddenly toward an object, the dim outlines of which seemed to be those of a human figure lying at his whole length on the snow, with his head hanging over the edge of a deep gully.

“ This way, Gage, this way ! ” he shouted, as he darted off, with a new cap on his rifle, and his eye fastened on the object.

Gage sprung after him, and when they reached the spot, lo ! a dead Indian, though not the Iroquois, lay there stretched at full length, frozen stiff and covered with ice, through which the wide-open eyes were still looking with a ferocious glare.

“ Horrible ! ” exclaimed Fletcher, growing suddenly pale and staggering away two or three steps.

Gage, too, was nearly overcome by the sight ; for the dead man’s eyes, he said, seemed to follow him whithersoever he moved ; and the coarse, brutal mouth, agape with an expression he never could think of without a shudder, and the tangled, bloody hair scattered by handfuls upon the snow and frozen into it, were indeed enough to fill every human heart with abhorrence and loathing, instead of compassion.

His arms were all abroad—in one hand a discharged rifle, and in the other, a large hunting-knife. The expression of his countenance, too, was not such as follows a sudden death by rifle-shot ; but rather that of death after a long and vehement struggle.

“ Are you sure, quite sure,” said Gage, “ that you heard only one shot ? ”

“ Yes—perfectly sure.”

“ And that followed immediately by a wild whoop ? ”

“ Why, no—not immediately—though within two or three minutes at furthest.”

"You see there is no tomahawk in his belt?"

"I do."

"Yet he must have carried one. Stay—a thought has just struck me!"—stooping down, and tearing away the coarse blanket, and the fur underneath, all stained with blood—"these are not signs of a gun-shot wound—much less of a rifle. Ah, look here!—gracious God!—the knife has gone through and through him!"

"I see! I see!" said Fletcher, turning away from the terrible exhibition, as if sickened at the sight, and just ready to drop.

"One moment, Fletcher," continued Gage, as if he had wholly overcome the horror that seized him at first, in his eagerness to get at the truth. "I want your help in searching for a bullet-mark, if there is one."

"You want my help in such a business!—not for the world!"

"Well, then, stay where you are; but keep your eyes on that clump of bushes on your left, and be prepared for the worst, while I continue the search."

This he did, as if long familiar with the horrors of a battle-field, or a slaughter-house, completely stripping the dead man to his waist, and turning him over to see if he was hit in the back.

"Not a scratch!" said he, as he drew up the covering and replaced the dead body in its original position, with the rifle and hunting-knife just as he had found them. "And now, if you please, my dear fellow, let us take a peep into those bushes, the only place near enough to explain what we see."

"Upon my word, captain, you astonish me. I had no idea you were so full of the hunter's craft," said Fletcher, "and still less, that you were able to read signs that I had overlooked."

"Nor I—and at another time you would have certainly forestalled me; but—excuse me—you were so entirely overcome by the sight of this dead body glaring up with his threatening eyes, through a thin coating of ice, that I do not wonder you thought of nothing else."

"Ah, look here!" said Gage, stamping with his foot upon

a heap of trodden snow, coated with ice, "here the deadly struggle must have taken place—look at these bushes!—and, as I live, here is the fellow's tomahawk; just where we should have looked for it, if we knew it was hurled at some hidden foe coming out of the underbrush there."

"And what are your inferences? I agree with you, thus far, and I must say, that my mind is made up," whispered Fletcher, as he examined the edge of the tomahawk, which must have been flung with prodigious force, to have buried itself as it had, in a charred stump, more than thirty yards off.

"Well, I say, in the first place, that this abominable savage was killed with a knife, and not with a rifle; and that in a hand-to-hand conflict."

"Agreed."

"In the next place, that he had already discharged his rifle at somebody or something—"

"Clear enough, so far."

"Which somebody or something was behind that stump: and that when the rifle was discharged, that somebody rose up—that the tomahawk was then flung at his head and buried itself in the stump—and then followed the rush, the war-whoop—and the struggle ending in the fellow's death," and here Gage lifted his foot as if to spurn a dead body visible only to himself.

Fletcher shuddered, but, after studying the signs, and examining the snow, and the broken twigs trampled into it, and covered with a coating of ice, he acknowledged the soundness of Gage's conclusions, and complimented him on his great shrewdness.

"Your senses have been sharpened, my friend, by your interest in that little moccasin," said he; "and now, if you please, what next?"

"Do you know," answered Gage, after musing a few minutes, "do you know that I have my suspicions of the—what shall I call him?—not the murderer, for the circumstances are all in his favor, thus far—but of the manslayer: for *that* he was, whether in self-defense, or an avenger of blood, as it may turn out hereafter."

"And so have I—"

"The Old Forester?"

“Exactly.”

“If so, what led him here? Can it be that Little Moccasin was abroad, or in danger, and that he was on the watch to save her?”

“Nothing more probable—but we are losing time. What do you propose now?”

“To find the trail of this fellow—and of his companions, if he had any—and then follow it up, till we are both satisfied about the screams you heard.”

Saying this, he started ahead on a long, slow trot, followed by Fletcher, and steering toward the north. It was now near nightfall, and they were beginning to feel discouraged, when Fletcher stopped and made a sign to Gage, and pointed to a twig of cedar which had been lately wrenched off, so as to hang only by the tough bark and a few fibers, and then turned in a contrary direction. After a little further search, they found other signs—two or three twigs of cedar under the ice, fastened by the ends to prevent their being washed or blown away, intermixed with dry leaves and other rubbish; but all the cedar twigs they saw, were pointing in the same direction, however confused they might appear at the first glance.

They stopped, and interchanged a look of mutual triumph, and then pushed on, till they met with other signs, and enough to convince them that they were on the track, not of one savage, nor of two, but of a band, a little way ahead of them.

At last, and while there was still light enough to see all the signs multiplying, as they got further and further into the woods, where the snow lay deeper—in some cases three and four feet deep on a level—and where the rain had been less plentiful, or the wind less violent, their attention was attracted by the apparition of a large man—so large as to seem almost colossal, through the shadowy haze, coming directly toward them.

It was the major himself—the Old Forester, and so changed of countenance they would hardly have known him, but for his bearing, and the dress he wore. Sternly and silently, he drew near, as if walking in his sleep; and when challenged, he stopped short, and looked up, with a bewildered air, as if he had not seen them before.

"God be thanked!" he exclaimed—"the very men I have most wished to meet with!"

"Well, major, what's to pay?" said Gage.

"Ask me no questions, I pray you, but look to yourselves. I want your help—and have been trying to find you for the last four-and-twenty hours. I have not eaten nor drank since yesterday morning—and I am dying for want of sleep."

"Here is no place for sleeping, major; but our game-bags are both full of provisions, and if you will take possession of that hillock yonder long enough to satisfy your hunger, you may depend upon our help."

For a moment, the major seemed choking—twice he opened his mouth and tried to speak, but the sounds died away in a low, gasping moan; and then, covering his face with his hands, he sunk down upon the hillock, while they opened their game-bags and set them on the ice before him.

"Take hold, major!—take hold!—you must be well-nigh famished," said Gage, handing him a cut of corned-beef and a piece of bread.

The major tried, but found he could not swallow—"his heart was in his throat," he said, and straightway the expression of his eyes changed, his chin quivered, and he sat before them gasping for breath, and trembling from head to foot. Nay, more—the man's eyes filled, and for the first time, they saw the lashes glistening.

After a few minutes, a brief, terrible struggle ensued—the perspiration started about his temples and mouth—his knees smote together—and then, all at once, he recovered his self-possession, took a bite of the cold meat, swallowing with difficulty, and turning toward our two hunters, asked them if they were ready.

"Ready for what, major?" asked Gage. "Let us understand what you require of us, and—there's my hand—for life or death!" And so said Fletcher.

"But first, a word or two with you, about yesterday, if you please. Where did you find shelter last night? Did you ever see such a sudden and violent rain, without notice?"

"Never!—and I was out in it all the time, never stopping nor resting, till I had finished the business on hand."

"You were on snow-shoes, were you not?" asked Fletcher,

glancing at Gage, and then at a broken strap and two or three leathern thongs about the Old Forester's legs."

"Yes; and wore them till the heavy rain made them of no use."

"Were they uncommonly large?"

"Among the largest you ever saw—but why do you ask?"

"One word more—had you a dog with you?"

"You are very inquisitive, to be sure. Yes, but they shot him."

Gage and Fletcher here interchanged another look, which the major saw.

"I know what you are thinking of," said he; "but this is no time for explanations. You may be right in your guesses, and you may be wrong; but what I want to know now is, whether you are ready to go with me on what I tell you now, may be a matter of life and death for all of us."

"With my whole heart!" said Gage. "We told you so at the beginning—but give us, I pray you, some idea of the errand before we start."

"Nothing but reasonable—they have carried off my child, and"—gasping, "she must be recovered before we sleep."

"His *child!* — *she!*" whispered Gage, with a look of triumph, which did not escape the watchful eye of the Old Forester, who seemed rather pleased than otherwise.

"About what age is the child?" asked Fletcher.

"A little over sixteen."

Up sprung the delighted Gage to his feet! and up sprung Fletcher! "We are both ready!" they cried; "but allow us to ask what your plan is?"

"Certainly. It is to find their trail—to follow it—and if we get a chance, to pick them off one by one; or if nothing better can be done, to wait until they camp, and settle the business by a night attack."

"And how many are there?" asked Fletcher.

"Only four now—they were five when they started with poor Lily-pad; but——" and he stopped short.

"Lily-pad?"

"Yes, that's what we have called her for the last dozen years. But mind you—we have to deal with some of the vilest and wickedest of all the Iroquois, and with one, a chief

who would be more than a match for any two common men; but, if we meet, I hope to give a good account of the fellow without anybody's help."

"How the man's eyes do glow!" whispered Gage.

"Iroquois, you say. Is the chief you mention a descendant of the Mohawks?" continued Fletcher.

"I am not sure—but I should think so, from what I have heard of him."

"Enough! enough!—hurrah! we are all ready now!" said they, both speaking together. "You lead off major, and we'll follow."

And the major led off. They found the trail, and followed it, until it grew so dark at times, notwithstanding the full moon, for the heavens were all covered with drifting clouds, that he was obliged to "heave to," as he called it.

After a short consultation, they started again, the major undertaking to lead them aright, by groping and feeling his way. Not a word was uttered: not a sound escaped the party, not a twig was trodden upon or snapped and there were seasons when all three held their breath, and moved like phantoms.

At last, the major stopped suddenly, and the others followed his example. A light was to be seen a long way off through the woods and across a gully, like the light of a camp-fire made with brushwood, under the trees.

"There! there!" whispered the major, clutching at Gage's arm. "Not a word for your life!" seeing him about to speak. "They must believe themselves out of danger, or they would never have kindled that fire, even for the sake of their prisoner. But still, such is the deadly craft we have to deal with, that our lives are wagered against theirs. Let me find you here, when I get back."

"When you get back? Man alive! What's in your head now?"

"I am going to see for myself how strong they are, and then try to save my poor child," wiping his eyes with his rough blanket, and complaining of the cold, frosty air. "No, no, Gage, you mustn't go with me. You may be wanted here. If any thing happens, you must act for yourselves, but promise me you'll not let poor Lily-pad be harmed."

"I'll answer with my life," said Gage.

"And I with mine," added Fletcher.

"See how the blaze lights up the wood, by fits and flashes, though they have built the fire, as you see, under a big hemlock, in the midst of a heavy undergrowth, and on the edge of the gully. So that if the fire should happen to flash up while I am creeping from one tree to another, I wouldn't give that for my chance"—snapping his fingers.

The next moment he was gone. But whither? and how? Not a sound reached them, and though it was very dark where they stood, he seemed to vanish while speaking to them. A thrill of superstitious terror took possession of both; but as they stood there listening and peering into the darkness, they saw a shadow glide along the surface of the snow, afar off on their left, more like a huge tortoise than a human being.

"I'll trust him after that," whispered Fletcher. "Neatest thing I ever saw! Shouldn't wonder if he managed to bring off the girl without our help."

"Nor I—hush!—did you hear any thing?"

"What like?"

"Like a step on our right, stealthy and—" here both stepped behind a tree, and crouched, listening; "a fox, maybe, or a wolf."

After waiting awhile, breathless and motionless, something touched Gage on the elbow. It thrilled to the bone.

"Who are you? and *what* are you?" said Gage, springing to his feet. A low, portentous chuckle betrayed the Old Forester; but how had he managed to steal upon them without being seen?

"I'll show you," said he, as if anticipating the question; "Look here!" And he threw the blanket on the snow, where it lay like a deep shadow, not to be distinguished from other shadows, and crept under it, and then, after watching till they looked another way, he stole off without being perceived.

"Well, major, what luck?"

"All we could wish. I found poor Lily-pad lying on a pile of spruce branches, with her hands tied, and perhaps her feet, pretending to be asleep. At one time, I was so near that

I thought she saw me, and I forgot myself so far that I was just about giving her a sign, when that Mohawk chief lifted his hands, as he sat on the ground cross-legged, with his elbows on his knees, and for a moment seemed to be looking into my very eyes. The firelight was in his, however, and so I escaped. He seemed to be watching poor Lily-pad, and saw nothing beyond, though I was almost near enough to touch her. Any dogs?—not a dog—nor was it likely there would be. Dogs are unsafe, except for hunting or night-watching.”

“And always unmanageable,” said Fletcher, “trained as the Indian dogs are—a set of yelping, noisy curs—and more like famished wolves than like our dogs. No, no—they would have no dogs about them till out of danger.”

“But I understood you, major, did I not,” said Gage, “that the fire we see yonder is a proof—proof positive—that the rascals consider themselves out of danger?”

The major nodded. “In case of accident,” said he, “I had some of the meat I could not swallow myself, all ready for the dogs.”

“How many are they?”

“As I told you before, they started with *five*, but somehow or other one seemed to have dropped out on the way—overcome with fatigue, perhaps.” And a gloomy smile played about his rigid mouth for a moment, and then vanished.

“And the other three—what were they doing?” asked Fletcher.

“All sound asleep—completely dragged out by their long and laborious tramp through deep snow and heavy rains, with Lily-pad in a litter, which they carried on long poles. She was pretending to be asleep, though I saw her little fingers at work upon the deerskin thong about her wrists. The fire seemed to have been made for her comfort, like the litter.”

“Capital!” whispered Gage. “And now, what next?”

“We’ll see,” said the major, looking up into the sky, as if wondering at the suddenness of the changes he saw there; now black as midnight where the shadows fell upon the glittering snow under the trees, and now almost as light as day. “Let me get a wink of sleep—not more than half an hour. Wake me before, if any thing happens,” and he threw himself upon a pile of snow, and was soon fast asleep.

"Just hear his breathing," said Gage after awhile. "How labored and fierce! And then, too, did you ever see more anguish of spirit in a human countenance?"

The light happened to be very strong just then, as the glorious moon rolled up over a bank of clouds, like a chariot over a thronged battle-field, and then, at the very next breath, all was dark as midnight, where they were sitting on the drifted snow. The sleeper struggled and muttered. "He must have had a frightful dream, Fletcher—would you wake him?" said Gage.

"Not for your life!" said Fletcher. "He knows what he wants, and he must have it. If he were not built of cast-iron, or quarried by a thunderbolt from the granite Hills of New Hampshire, he never would have come out of yesterday's tramp alive, to say nothing of the death-struggle with that red monster. Ah!—Gracious God!—what have we here!"

In his nightmare struggles, the sleeper had disengaged his right arm—it was bandaged from the wrist up; and thrown off a corner of his blanket—it was dark and stiff with what appeared to be blood. The moonlight fell upon his face, and there was no mistaking the horrible significance of such signs. There were cuts and gashes, too, along the chest, some of which must have gone through the undershirt of deer-skin.

While they were yet standing over the poor fellow, and shuddering at these revelations, he started up with a faint wailing cry, throwing his arms abroad with his fists clenched, and large glittering teeth set like a tiger's. "Let us be gone!" said he.

"But you haven't had your nap out."

"Never mind. I'm wanted—I can not sleep—I was a fool for trying." And then he stopped suddenly, and gathered up the blanket, and withdrew the bandaged arm, while eying Fletcher askance, as if to see if they had observed the condition of his blanket; and then, he grew deadly pale—staggered—and would have fallen, but for Gage.

"God help us! You are desperately wounded, I fear," said Fletcher.

"I hope not—only a few scratches; but the loss of blood has weakened me, and my right arm is getting stiff and

unmanageable, and—and—I greatly fear I am no longer the man I was.”

“And therefore,” suggested Gage, “you may be no match for the Mohawk, if he should happen to cross your path.”

The Old Forester’s brow darkened, as with hidden thunder, and his gloomy eyes glowed, as with an evil spirit looking out.

“You must leave him to me,” continued Gage.

“Leave him to *you*—leave the giant Mohawk to *you*!” exclaimed the Old Forester, eying poor Gage as the kingly Saul might have eyed the stripling David, before he was told of the bear and the lion, whose jaws were rent asunder by the ruddy-cheeked boy.

Instead of replying, Gage sprung at a heavy branch, far above his head, clutched it, and drew himself up with his left hand, and then threw himself completely over it, and came down the other side on his feet.

“That’ll do!” said the Forester, with a glow of triumphant joy. “I am satisfied! And now, Captain Gage, if the worse comes to the worst—as I hope it may—I shall turn the big Mohawk over to you; and there’s my hand on it!”

“But something must be done with your hurts, major,” said Gage.

“Give yourself no trouble about them or me; they are well wrapped up with swamp leaves and fir-balsam, and my arm is bandaged, as you see. But we must hold a consultation before going any further.”

Whereupon they took instant possession of a huge pine tree, one of the Titanic aboriginals, which had fallen ages before, and now lay directly athwart their path, some of the roots still clinging to the soil, and some of the top branches yet green. Here they sat with their faces turned toward the distant fire, and occasionally sweeping the whole field of vision as the clouds drifted away with sudden alternations of midnight gloom and glory, and carried on their consultation in whispers.

At last, they agreed upon a plan of operations. Being but three, they concluded not to attack the four all at once, even if they should be found all asleep, as there would be one too many for them. “And what, then, would become of poor Lily-pad?” whispered Gage. Poor fellow! When he thought

of the possibilities, if but one of the whole party should escape the first fire—she lying bound and helpless with the exasperated savage standing over her—perhaps with a lifted tomahawk or a scalping-knife, his blood ran cold.

“ ‘Catch a weasel asleep!’ you say, my friends; but I say, catch an Indian asleep! and yet, I have caught these very fellows asleep once; and may again; for Indians, after all, can not live without sleeping.”

“Leave the business to me,” continued the major, “and I will undertake to separate them, so that we may all have a chance. If I should not be able to draw off more than one, you must leave him to me, while you manage the others.”

“But if the one you draw off should happen to be the Mohawk chief,” said Gage, “what then?”

“Well, then, he must take his chance. But I have an idea that he would be the last—the very last—to leave the lodge; and you would think so, too, if you had seen his eyes and the expression of his terrible countenance, not an hour ago, as he sat watching the poor child, with no idea that she was awake, or that she was watching him through her fingers, with her hands clasped over her eyes. If I should manage to lure him away, you must follow him, if you please, Captain Gage, and I want you to drop him the first chance you get—and then, back to poor Lily-pad. Otherwise, I may have to take him in hand.”

Gage made no reply; but he breathed a little harder, and as he thought of “*dropping*” a foe, without giving him a chance, he shuddered. It seemed so cowardly, at first; but he soon got over the repugnance and the misgiving, and thought only of the prize. Was it not a wager of death? and a wager, too, with a foe incapable of consideration or forbearance, who would glory in surprising and tomahawking and scalping all three of them?

“All fair and proper,” said Fletcher; “but what am I to do?”

“Keep as near the Mohawk chief as you possibly can, and the moment you catch him alone, put a ball through his head.”

“With all my heart, major; but if I shouldn’t happen to catch him alone?”

"He mustn't be allowed to escape, whatever may become of the others ; and as we all three want a crack at him, I shall give you both a chance if I can. If there should be but one of the gang with him—let the others go, and fetch the Mohawk. After all, however, you must be governed by circumstances. If I can manage to wheedle away one or two of their number—and I think I can, for I know them well, having hunted with them and warred with them before to-day—though it should only be for a few minutes, we shall have time to load after the first fire, and then, I think, we may dispose of the whole four to a dead certainty."

"Oh, for my double-barrel!" muttered Fletcher.

"Yes, to be sure, for close fighting ; but give me the rifle for a long shot."

"When I have been gone about five minutes, you may follow," continued the major. "Get within half pistol-shot if you can, without disturbing them, and wait for the signal."

"For the signal?"

"Yes, a rifle-shot," said the major, fetching the gun he carried a hearty slap on the breech. "But mind, not a step, not a word, till you hear the shot. I shall not fire, I promise you, till I am sure of my man."

"But if you should fail in separating them?"

"Then there is only one way left. We must fall upon them together, each taking his man ; and after disposing of three, rush together between the fourth and the poor child."

The next minute he was gone—slipping away like a shadow. No sound reached them, save that of the far-off rustling wind among the pines, and the sharp tinkling of icicles here and there in the depth of the forest. The five minutes having passed, Gage and Fletcher now started off in the direction of the fire. Twice they saw the figure of a large man moving athwart the blaze, evidently on the alert, and keeping watch ; but they were exceedingly cautious, and it was a good half-hour, if not longer, before they found themselves near enough to make out the enemy, man by man, and arrange the attack, subject to contingencies.

They found the savages all awake, and preparing for a move. Lily-pad was sitting up in her litter, with her hands tied, though her feet seemed to be free. The Mohawk chief sat

watching her, with a look of wonder and triumph—though his broad chest heaved in the firelight, and his gloomy eyes were burning with inward fire.

And now, for the first time, poor Gage had a good look at her, and as he and Fletcher interchanged a glance of admiration, it was evident enough that both had arrived at the same conclusion. Slender and lithe, her black hair flowing loose over a richly-embroidered blanket, with a tunic of crimson cloth, highly ornamented, underneath, and a necklace of what seemed to be large, heavy gold-beads hanging low upon her bosom—and glittering bracelets upon her arms, the beautiful creature, with her large, melancholy eyes, and finely-cut mouth and voluptuous lips—had the appearance of something oriental and visionary. Two of the party were preparing the litter, while a fourth, a great, bull-headed, lubberly fellow, seemed to be getting the traps together.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ONSET.

GAGE began to grow impatient, and he played nervously with the hilt of his hunting-knife; and even Fletcher could hardly bear the suspense, but kept fingering the lock of his rifle, as they both lay upon their faces, with eyes fixed upon their prey, and waiting for the signal. After awhile they were startled by a strange sound afar off, like the rasping of wood, or the browsing of some huge animal.

“What is it?” asked Gage with his eyes.

“Moose,” answered Fletcher, not by words, but by breathing, “Ah!”

Just then, as from the hollow depth of the woods, a great way off, they heard a prolonged melancholy sound, like oo-oo-oo! something between a subdued bellow and a trumpet wail.

“Ugh!” grunted the Mohawk chief, snatching up his rifle, and rushing out, followed by two of his companions, and then, after a few moments, by the third.

Gage sprang to his feet, and prepared for the onset, while

Fletcher lay motionless and silent in his lair, waiting for the signal. But no signal was heard. Another minute passed—another—it seemed very long, and then came a sharp, distant rifle-crack, so far off as to astonish them.

Their path was now clear, and away both sprung, like sleuth-hounds upon the trail. The beautiful captive threw up her pinioned arms, and rose to her feet; Gage saw her, and instantly forgetting the whole plan of operations, turned back, whipped out his long hunting-knife, and telling the poor girl not to be frightened, sprung to her help, leaving his rifle, where it stood, leaning against a tree. Instead of screaming or crouching, or trying to hide herself—instead of being paralyzed with terror, when she saw the apparition of a stranger bursting from the deep shadow with flaming eyes, and brandishing a knife, as he rushed upon her, the brave girl threw back her head with the air of a princess having armed attendants within call, and fastened her flashing eyes upon him; and then, as if satisfied with what she saw at a single glance—moved toward him, and held out her pinioned arms with a look he will never forget to his dying day.

One flash of that sharp, glittering knife, and she was free! And the next moment, before he had time to speak, she had vanished; and then, God help the poor fellow! there was a tiger-spring, and he found himself completely overborne and pressed to the earth by something huge and colossal that came out of the darkness behind him. In the first shock and surprise and terror of the moment, the hunting-knife flew from his hand into the bushes far beyond his reach—the rifle, too, was a long way off—and there he lay struggling and prostrate, and gasping for breath—weaponless and helpless—with his forehead forced down into the wet snow, and one knee of his powerful adversary planted just between his shoulders with a pressure so enormous and so irresistible, that he remembered nothing like it in all his past experience. He tried to lift his head—to turn it—to look up into the face of the awful mystery that was trying to throttle him, or, perhaps, to smother him outright in the half-melted snow and ashes. But all in vain, though, in the struggle, he caught a glimpse of richly-embroidered leggings, and a heavy scarlet fringe along the borders of a fur robe; and, at last, of something like the hilt

of a silver-mounted sheath-knife, at which his foe was tugging with his left hand, while pressing Gage's face into the snow with his right.

Desperate and furious with a sense of mortal anguish and horror—for the scarlet fringe and the sumptuous leggings had revealed the Mohawk chief to him, as by a flash of lightning, so that he no longer needed to look up—poor Gage breathed one word of prayer to the God of his fathers, and then, like the giant of old, when he heaved at the pillars of the temple, and tore it down, together with all the lords of the Philistines, upon his own head, he gathered himself for one last convulsive effort, and was preparing for the final issue of life or death—for one or both—when a shot was heard afar off, in a different direction from the first, followed instantly by another—and then, there was a loud scream, like that of a young panther, so near and so startling, that he felt the grasp of the Mohawk chief relaxing, and the pressure of his knee lightening. Whereupon, thrusting both hands behind him, and throwing his arms round his adversary's legs, and heaving with all his might, for life or death, he tumbled him backward, and instantly changing his position, like the adroit wrestler he was, threw himself upon him like a panther.

Not a word had been spoken, not a cry uttered—nothing heard but the sound of a death-grapple, with an occasional gasp of agony. But the dread issue was far from being determined. Weaponless himself, Gage saw with unspeakable dismay that the tremendous savage, who had been tugging so long with his left hand at his knife, had now disengaged it from the sheath in falling backward, and held it clutched in that same left hand, with remorseless energy, and lifted just ready to strike.

Gage caught him by his wrist with his right, which had the grip of a blacksmith's vice; but in the short, fierce struggle that instantly followed, received two or three blows that seemed to go through and through him—and then cries were heard approaching from different quarters, and then there passed before him the flitting shadow of a woman; and before he had time to look up or speak, he felt the handle of his own familiar hunting-knife in his convulsive gripe, the

very knife which flew from his hand as he fell forward on his face, before the unrelenting shape that sprung upon him ; and the next minute, lo ! it was buried in the breast of his dread adversary, up to the hilt !

One gasp—one howl of anguish and wrath—and the giant savage half rose with an exertion of preternatural strength, like another Philip of Mount Hope in his great agony—fell back, rolled over, and lay quivering in death. Although that blow was given by Gage with his left hand, no second blow was needed. The eyes of the dying man were so terrible, and the gush of blood so plentiful and sickening, that poor Gage, while staggering away toward the rifle he had left so carelessly out of reach, fainted and fell, and lay there outstretched, like a dead man frozen stiff, with the knife he had clutched still dripping blood.

CHAPTER X.

PETER SMITH.

AFTER many days, Gage found himself upon a bed of cedar branches, in a strange camp. He had passed through a long, terrible dream, in which he had been upon trial for his life, with a jury of skeletons—and then he had found himself trying to hold back Little Moccasin from the edge of a crumbling precipice, with white surges rolling and tumbling hundreds of feet below ; and then he was engaged in a death-struggle, first with the Mohawk chief, and then with a grizzly bear.

Low whispering was about him, and the hand which hung over the edge of his bed was wet, and he felt, or thought he felt before he ventured to take a peep, the pressure of warm young lips upon it, more than once.

After listening awhile with shut eyes and bated breath, he managed, by a slight change of position, to get a glimpse of two women sitting near—one tall and stately, and the other quite young, with her head bowed over his hand, which she

held between both of hers, and her long hair floating loose. The countenance of the elder was haughty and imperious, but very beautiful; that of the younger he could only guess at, from an occasional glimpse, as she lifted her head once or twice, after pressing her warm, wet lips to his pale, trembling hand, and flung back her abundant tresses. "Little Moccasin, as I live!" said he to himself; "but who is the queenly stranger?"

And then he fell asleep again, like an overwearied child; and was awakened at last by a variety of noises, all about him—caterwauling on the roof, the crowing of a cock at his very elbow, and the yelping of a dog, followed by the screaming of a cat.

"Confound that Charley! Out with you, sir!" said a voice that he knew, which appeared to come from the outside of the lodge. "You ought to have the skin stripped over your eyes!"

"Certainly, your eminence—any thing more?"

"Be quiet, sir, and come out of that, if you know when you are well off."

And then there was more whispering; and Fletcher said, "There wasn't any moose, I tell you. The noise we first heard, like rasping and the snapping of twigs and the stripping of bark, was all made by the major; and then he gave us the moose-horn—oo-oo-oo!"

"The moose-horn!"

"A trumpet made of birch-bark. That finished the business. But how came you to find us, Charley, my boy?" continued Fletcher.

"Wal, when that she-wolf burst open the door of the lodge, and stood still, with her black eyes flashing fire, a knife in her belt and a rifle in her hand, we were all frightened about enough, I tell you. She told her story in short meter, and we all jumped up and offered to go with her. She let me lead off, but I soon lost the track, somehow. After looking about and considering a few moments, her face brightened up, and she started off in the direction of that gully, where we found the trapper's lodge under the bank. And then—and then, we heard firing, and then we hurried up and found the cap'n stretched out on his back and bleeding to death,

and the big chief stark and stiff, dead as a mitten. And then we took the cap'n off on a litter, followed by the she-wolf and her cub—beg pardon—Little Moccasin—Lily pad—crying and wringing her hands, all the way, like a Christian child."

Then the whispering died away, and somebody came up to the side of his couch and felt his pulse with the soft touch of a woman's hand. Then a whole week went over, and he was able to sit up. And then, after expressing a desire to see Little Moccasin's father, he fell asleep while waiting for the answer, and was awakened by the sound of trampling feet at the door. It opened with a burst, and in walked the Old Forester, followed by a magnificent-looking woman, wearing a strange dress, half civilized and half barbarous, and Little Moccasin herself, hanging behind, with downcast eyes and trembling from head to foot—and then by the whole power of the camp.

"Captain Gage," said the Old Forester, after a dead silence of two or three minutes, leading up the haughty, fierce-looking woman hardly darker than a pale Spaniard, "Captain Gage—Oonancee!"

"Oonancee!" exclaimed Gage, completely bewildered, for a moment; "and this child?"

"Our daughter, Captain Gage."

"Your daughter!—*her* daughter!—then who in God's name are you?"

"Peter Smith, at your service."

"Peter Smith!" shouted Hannaford. "Thunder and lightning!"

"Peter Smith! *Je-ru-sa-lem*!" said Perry.

"Then you're the very fellow you told that long story about, hey? And your wife is the very gal that stabbed the young British officer?" added Charley.

And then the Old Forester took Lily-pad by the hand, and led her up to the bench where Gage was lying propped up with blankets and pillows. "She wants to thank you, Captain Gage," said he.

Whereupon Lily-pad fell upon her knees, and catching the captain's hand with a low murmur, began caressing it. He remembered the touch, and leaning forward set a seal upon

her upturned brow, which brought the blood to her face like a flash. And then, after sending off all the rest of the crew, they sat down and held a talk together, and came to a full understanding before they separated, about the past and the future.

It came out in the course of explanation, that after the birth of their first and only child—Little Moccasin—Oonanee received so much attention from the officers of the garrison, and particularly from Lieutenant Somerville, that her husband grew uneasy, and they finally went off into the heart of the wilderness, a long way from Quebec; that he had found some verses written to his wife by Somerville, and kept them festering like an ulcer in his heart, until, since the recovery of their child, his wife had called his attention to the fact that they were addressed “to the Indian *Girl* of Lake Onaliso”—and of course were written to her before marriage; and had then shown him a letter from Lieutenant Somerville, where he begged her pardon for having written to her, and where it seemed that she had threatened to report him to his commanding officer, if he ever ventured to speak to her again.

And then followed the story of Little Moccasin, till she had found her father; and then, all that was worth knowing of the Mohawk chief. It seemed that he had asked her in marriage; and having been refused by the mother, he had just made all his arrangements to carry off the prize, when, on reconnoitering the lodge, he found it empty. Lily-pad had gone off suddenly without her mother's knowledge, on overhearing a new proposition from Big Thunder, the Mohawk chief, and the mother had followed, expecting to find her husband among the lumbermen of the Aroostook where he had a great reputation. After a long and tiresome search at Quebec and Montreal, she met with a Penobscot, who described the situation of Gage's camp, and the appearance of a strange man they called major. This led her to the lodge where she found Charley, and within five minutes, she was on the trail of Big Thunder, with five or six of the generous fellows to help her.

And then, poor Little Moccasin told her story; how she had hunted the wilderness alone, day after day, for her father, until she found him, and they had nestled down together in the

trapper's lodge under the bank, which he prepared for her having lived meanwhile on such game as fell in her way.

And then—and then—after awhile, there was a marriage, and then, didn't the sleigh-bells jingle! and the whips crack! and the steel runners flash and ring over the icy snow, as they never had done before, till the captain found himself alone with his dear little wife, and both kneeling together in their own Aroostook hunting-lodge—that sanctuary of wilderness.

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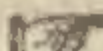
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